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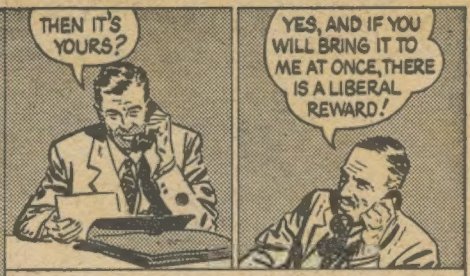

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SIGN OF SATAN

"Satan," said Judge Jeremy Free, "just give me a sign. And if my verdict don't please you—I'll change it!"

By JOHN T. LYNCH

JEREMY FREE was the only man in Alder Gulch, in 1865, who was on speaking terms with the Devil. Without doubt, most of the denizens of the explosive gold-mining town were well known to Satan, but in a more formal manner. But Jeremy talked to the Evil One, and, in return, got certain "signs" in lieu of verbal answers.

Old Jeremy had long since figured out that he had no possible chance of going to Heaven. His reasons were valid. Being a practical man, he wanted to make his life in Hell as easy as possible. The best way to insure good treatment in the hereafter was to do a bit of apple polishing in regard to his future boss, the man with the horns.

Each night, in the privacy of his cabin, Jeremy would talk to Satan. "I shore did all I could, today, to please you, sir. I swore, stole, fought and raised hell, gen'rally. An' right now, before I lay down to snooze, as you see, I'm drunk as a man can git. Now, Devil, I don't expect no pleased answer from you. But, remember—any time I do anything that don't set right with you, just give me a sign. That's all I need. A sign."

Age and lack of imagination prevented Jeremy Free from sinning in a more spectacular and serious manner. His thieving was confined to picking up small nuggets on unwatched claims, or pouring an extra shot of whiskey out of the bottle on the bar when nobody was looking. His drunkenness was on a small scale and went unnoticed by his fellow citizens.

There were so many real crimes being committed in Alder Gulch and its diggings at all times, that, to the other people, Jeremy Free was considered an ideal, public-spirited and virtuous citizen. For this reason he was always called upon to act as judge whenever a miners' court session had to be called—which was frequently.

Alder Gulch used a great, flat platform of stone, just out of town as a court. Named "Pulpit Rock," this wonder of nature stood for centuries balanced on the lip of a deep gulch. It was an ideal and dramatic spot in which to deal out justice.

Because Jeremy Free had never told anybody in the Gulch that he was conversant with Satan, he always addressed his future ramrod secretly, just before a court case would begin. "Satan," he would whisper, "if my verdict don't please you—jest give me a sign, an' I'll change it."

On the first day of May, in 1865, Mr. Musselshell Shoot was caught in the embarrassing act of stealing three large pokes of gold dust from the cabin of a miner who was enjoying an alcoholic stupor.

Several of the miner's friends happened

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

along just at the time Mr. Shoot was emerging from the premises with the purloined treasure. There was a short skirmish. Mr. Musselshell Shoot didn't have a chance.

A miners' court was hastily called into session. Judge Jeremy Free presided, as usual. After his routine address to his friend, the Devil, he called court to order. On hearing the testimony of the men who had actually caught Musselshell Shoot stealing the gold, Jeremy muttered, under his breath, "Satan, this time you don't need to even listen to my verdict. I know you'll be pleased with it. No need to give me a sign."

The jury quickly brought in a verdict of guilty. For once, the judge agreed with them. It was an open-and-shut case.

"Musselshell Shoot," said the judge, "you heard the verdict. So I'll now pronounce sentence. By the way, that's a hell of a name you've got. But it won't matter any more, because I sentence you to hang by the skinny neck until . . ." This was as far as Jeremy got.

A dry thunderstorm had been building up for ten minutes. Two blinding flashes of lightning were followed by roaring peals of thunder that vibrated the earth. Down in the gulch, under the base of the great balanced rock, a minor landslide started. It was enough to make Pulpit Rock begin to sway violently. Criminal, jury, spectators and judge made a beeline for solid ground. Just in time. With a mighty rumble the rock tottered, then went crashing down into the deep gulch.

JEREMY was not only frightened at the narrow escape; he was puzzled. He had received a sign from the Devil, sure enough. Satan was not pleased with the verdict. But why? It was a clear case. The Devil must be deaf.

The entire court repaired to the nearest saloon to soothe their collective shock. All were so busy gulping nerve medicine, and talking about the crashing courtroom, that nobody kept an eye on the prisoner. Mr. Musselshell Shoot, an opportunist, quietly departed. Unmolested, he helped himself to a convenient horse, rode out to the cabin where he had stolen the gold, and walked in. He was glad to see that the miner was still unconscious, and that the three pokes of gold were still obtainable. He picked them up, hopped on the horse and went back to the river whence he derived his name.

Not until the miner finally awakened and found his gold gone did the folks of Alder Gulch realize that their prisoner had fled. The miner, who knew nothing of the day's events, came roaring into town to report the theft of his dust. He did not know it had been stolen once before and returned to its place.

This miner, a good crony of Jeremy Free's, could ill afford the loss of so much gold. Who could? Jeremy thought the matter over. The Devil was responsible for his friend losing the dust. If Satan had minded his own affairs and not sent a "sign" in such a violent manner, the criminal would have been punished, and the miner would have his gold. Jeremy was disgusted with his future boss. And he said so.

"Devil," he said, "I been tryin' to keep on the good side of you. But it seems you ain't got no good side. No sense, either. When I asked for a sign, I merely meant a tap on the shoulder, or a little bird whistlin' at me, or somethin' easy. They was no call for you to toss our entire courtroom down in the gulch. That's overdoin' it."

Jeremy's mind was made up. Henceforth he would concentrate on trying to get to Heaven—impossible though it might be. Jeremy gulped the last of his beer, then shouted, "Satan, as far as I'm concerned—you can jest go plumb to Hell!"

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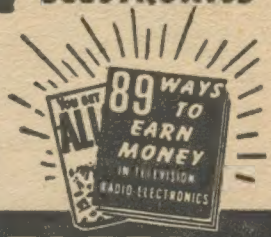

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OUTTRAIL CARAVAN

You've heard of Tombstone, Deadwood, Virginia City, Silver City. But did you ever hear of Pioche, Nevada? Or Jackson City, Nevada? Or Weaverville, California? The chances are that you haven't. But it wasn't because these cities didn't supply their share of meat for the local boothills. It's because Western historians have, for some reason, mostly ignored them.

Pioche is a little town 150 miles north of Las Vegas and apparently right on the trade route to Hell. According to Tom Wilson, Nevada historian, Pioche easily outdistances Tombstone and other well-known centers of the killing industry in the number of gents who took up permanent claims in boothill.

Seventy-five residents of this hell-roaring town died of gunshot wounds before a single death occurred from natural causes.

"For sheer disregard of life, limb and property," says Mr. Wilson, "Pioche had it all over the rest."

Partisans for Jackson City's gun-glory have a tendency to sneer at Pioche's claim, as Jackson City sets its boothill dead at eighty-seven. To be fair, we have to admit that it is not specified whether these killings were consecutive. It's just possible that some tenderfoot might have had the gall to die of natural causes somewhere in between the killings.

The sheriff and judge of Jackson City was Ed Oliver. Promptly after each shooting, Ed arrested the killer, in his capacity of sheriff. Then, donning his judicial manner, he would try the man. The penalties for murder were standard. First killing: $50. Second killing: $100. Third killing: $200. Anybody who had over three killings to his credit was never fined. He was too dangerous to be trifled with.

Weaverville, California, has not, as far as we know, ever taken a census of its boothill population, but students of Western lore claim that in its heyday it could have shown both Pioche and Jackson City a thing or two. Main contributor to this condition was a six-foot-six, 240-pound gent known far and wide as "The Infant." The Infant's hobby was to break up gun battles unarmed, by "lightly" tapping the battlers on the head with his bare fists.

Most of the tappees ended up in the morgue, but those who survived were then carried tenderly over to the jailhouse by the Infant, to ponder their vices and resolve to sin no more.

In 1850, when half of Weaverville's population was Chinese, members of two rival tongs, encouraged by amusement-seeking white miners, met in battle. Cheered on by the miners, the two tongs, consisting of about 800 men, hacked and stabbed away at each other, until Ah You's group was badly routed by Young Wo's valiant warriors. At the last, there were left only two battlers, who stood calmly jabbing at each other with huge iron forks, until one of them fell dead. The other died shortly afterwards.

Maybe those were indeed the "good old days." But as for us, we'll take the modern days. Instead of lying in some weed-grown boothill, we'd prefer to spend our old age comfortably propped up in bed, a copy of *Ace-High Western* in our hands, reading about the early days of the West, the gun battles, the steamboat races on the Missouri, the turbulent boomtowns, the men and women who fought and died to build a nation.

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You'll agree with thousands of others that this is a wonderfully easy way to solve your money problem. No matter who you are or where you live—if you're over 25 years old and steadily employed—mail this coupon now. Loans are made to men and women in all walks of life and in all kinds of jobs—to factory and office workers, teachers, civil service employees, railroad men, and hundreds of others. Get the money you need and get it now. Rush the coupon.

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Complete privacy is assured. No one knows you are applying for a loan. All details are handled in the privacy of your own home, and entirely by mail. ONLY YOU AND WE KNOW ABOUT IT!

Old Reliable Company—MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF SERVICE!

STATE FINANCE COMPANY was organized in 1897. During the past 54 years, we have helped over 1,000,000 men and women in all walks of life. Confidential loans are made all over America, in all 48 states. We are licensed by the Banking Department of the State of Iowa to do business under the Small Loan Law. You'll enjoy borrowing this free, confidential, convenient way from this old, responsible company in whom you can place the greatest confidence.

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In plain envelope, send me FREE "Borrow-by-Mail" details.

Name_____ Age_____

Address_____ Occupation_____

City_____ State_____

"Come an' get him, Pecos!" Piggin'-String called.

That grim night, Piggin'-String adopted himself an orphan—and a war.

BANJOES AND BULLETS

By
ROBERT T. WARWICK

THERE wasn't much in favor of the one-horse rancher folks called Piggin'-String Elias. Shiftless, lazy and generally no-account, he'd rather sit in the untidy kitchen of his ranch house playing the banjo than work like his neighbors, getting in winter feed, figuring how they could fatten their herd. In the Grindstone Valley each cattleman had all he could do to make ends meet, and there was nothing left over. Besides, there was no reason why they should support an able-bodied man, and they told him so.

His wife knew that Piggin'-String's shiftless ways had gotten on the neighbors' nerves as much as on her own. But she didn't have to worry long, for about the time of the first chinook that year she died giving birth to a baby. Piggin'-String, as was characteristic, had fumbled and bungled more than he had helped, and when he finally rode to town for the doc he must have known there wasn't much chance to save his woman.

The doc was fresh from the East. When Piggin'-String stumbled in, more dead than alive himself, and answered the doc's questions, the medico shook his head, "Nothing in the world that I can do, mister," he said. "Why, man, it's a forty-mile ride to your place, and I doubt if I could get a horse through this storm."

"But—but there must be *something* you can do, Doc," Piggin'-String pleaded. "I—I ain't givin' up hope without you come out!"

The doc hemmed and hawed, then looked out the window and listened to the howling of the wind. "Don't be a fool, man!" he said, and went on with his bacon and eggs.

Maybe it was just as well that his wife

(Continued on page 14)

IF IT SLIPS... IF IT CHAFES... IF IT GRIPES... THEN

THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!

Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry, and fear—if we provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair*. The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives *Wonderful Protection*

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

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Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security,—or it costs you NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way, softly, silently helping Nature support the weakened muscles. Learn what this marvelous invention may mean to you—send coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete Brooks is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

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PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 52,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Never Loses a Day's Work in Shipyard

"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. I put it on the afternoon I received it and wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. You have been a life saver to me. I never lose a day's work now. One of my buddies was ruptured on the job about two months ago. After seeing my Appliance he wants me to order him one." J. A. Comer, 1506 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Satisfaction in Every Way

"I am happy to report that the Appliance that I received from you more than a year ago has given perfect satisfaction in every way.

"In fact, I am not sure I will ever need another one, but I am asking you to send me the best grade as marked on the order blank, then if I should ever need it I would have it. I think I would want to use it when I go for long walks or work at heavy work of any kind, just for protection."—H. M. Herron, Mouthcard, Ky.

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Name .....

Street .....

City..... State.....

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

(Continued from page 12)

and kid died. From then on, Piggin'-String kept to himself, and his banjo.

Neighbor ranchers prospered, but stubborn-like, Piggin'-String hung onto his good grazing land, laughing at all attempts to buy him out. It seemed as if he was staying on just to annoy the ranchers who were trying hardest to get ahead. And he was succeeding.

Pecos Rand said that he was the most gutless critter he'd ever seen, and the Valley folks would do well to get shut of him. There was ugly talk going around directed toward him.

And then, from a new direction, hell's own brew began to simmer just over the rim. Five thousand bleating grass-destroyers were headed for the Grindstone, guarded by three-four herders and a dozen hired gunmen.

Already some of the bleaters had been clubbed and shot in a night attack by ranchers. Already Big Joe Gomez, top rider for Pecos Rand's Quarter Circle, had been found, his body riddled by buckshot.

When a bunch of Valley ranchers rode to Piggin'-String's spread and told him that every cowman was needed with his gun that night, Piggin'-String shrugged and looked away. Pecos Rand, eyes shimmering with anger, dragged his Colt and jabbed it into Piggin'-String's chest. "Yeller son!" he snarled, "You been around this place too long already. Either fog out of the Valley, or grab your gun an' help us. I don't care which!"

Piggin'-String looked plenty scared. But, right then, guns started to pop up near the rim. Pecos and his bunch thundered away, promising to come back and ventilate his carcass as soon as they'd settled the sheep invasion.

Eyes lusterless, Piggin'-String slouched into his tumble-down cabin, started throwing his few belongings into a tattered warbag. Never a fighter, it seemed as if the last vestige of manhood had seeped out of him during the long, empty years.

From the distance he heard shots and yells. At dusk he looked toward the rim where the sky was flame-red. He knew the abandoned shack where the herders must have holed up, knew that the cattlemen must be firing it. A complete wipe-out, and he was next in line! A renegade, a worthless coward, and worse—traitor to his kind.

A cold night wind whined eerily down from the rim, bringing with it the smell of powdersmoke. Piggin'-String was toting his war-bag toward the door when he suddenly stopped. From just outside, in the scrub stuff and rank grass, he heard a strange, scratching sound. Then a feeble knock. His hand closed coldly over the butt of his old Navy model and he inched open the door, calling a question.

A moan answered. Piggin'-String, trembling, saw a dim, human form lying in the darkness. He dragged the man inside, slammed the door.

A kid sheepherder. Badly shot up, with blood welling from a hole in his chest. Piggin'-String went to work, doused the wound with whiskey, bandaged it as best he could while the kid gasped out that the sheep had been run over a cliff and every man killed excepting him.

THEN came the thunder of hoofs in the dooryard, the hoarse shouts of men urged on by the killing lust. For a second Piggin'-String stood there, his brain seething. He knew now what Pecos and his crew wanted—the kid. Why, that kid would be about the same age as his own . . . and he remembered the doc who had refused to come and help him as his wife lay dying. Something seemed to snap inside Piggin'-String. Maybe he realized that he was a man, after all. Or maybe he just saw this kid, pumping his life blood away.

"We're gettin' that sheep-walkin' kid, Piggin'-String. You'll do well to hand him

(Continued on page 112)

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS WITH WARD'S FORMULA

NOTHING, *Absolutely nothing known to Science can do more to*

SAVE YOUR HAIR

Proof! We get letters like these every day from grateful men and women all over the world.

Beware of your itchy scalp, hair loss, dandruff, head scales, unpleasant head odors! Nature may be warning you of approaching baldness. Heed Nature's warning! Treat your scalp to scientifically prepared Ward's Formula.

Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but *all four* types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

ENJOY THESE 5 BENEFITS IMMEDIATELY

1. Kills these 4 types of germs that retard normal hair growth—*on contact*
2. Removes ugly infectious dandruff—*fast*
3. Brings hair-nourishing blood to scalp—*quickly*
4. Stops annoying scalp itch and burn—*instantly*
5. Starts wonderful self-massaging action—*within 3 seconds*

Once you're bald, that's *it*, friends! There's nothing you can do. Your hair is gone forever. So are your chances of getting it back. But Ward's Formula, used as directed, keeps your sick scalp free of itchy dandruff, seborrhea, and stops the hair loss they cause. Almost at once your hair looks thicker, more attractive and alive.

We don't ask you to believe *us*. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read *their* grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at *our* risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK. You be the judge! © Ward Laboratories Inc., 1430 Broadway, New York 18, N.Y.

TO SAVE YOUR HAIR ACT NOW
Send coupon today for 10-day offer. Send No Money

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
E. K., Cleveland, Ohio

Out of all the Hair Experts I went to, I've gotten the *most* help from one bottle of Ward's Formula.
C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.

I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—no *dandruff!*
W. T. W., Portola, Cal.

I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but Double Your Money Back unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

Ward Laboratories Inc.

ACT TODAY or YOU MAY BE TOO LATE!

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Rush Ward's Formula to me at once. I will pay postmen two dollars plus postage. I must be completely satisfied within 10 days, or you GUARANTEE refund of DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK upon return of bottle and unused portion.

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☐ Check here if you enclose $2.00 with order, and we will pay postage. Same refund offer holds, of course. *APO, FPO, Canada & Foreign add 50c, no C.O.D.s.*

DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

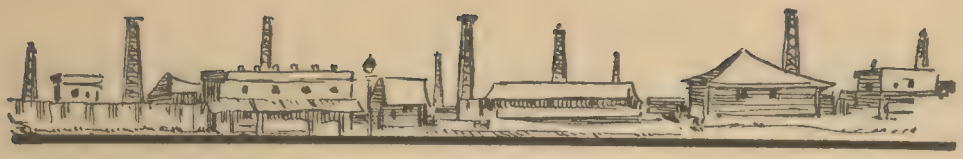
BLACK GOLD BUCCANEERS!

CHAPTER ONE

Boothill Beam

HIGH up in the hills a tiny dazzling star blazed suddenly to life. For an instant it hung motionless, glittering under the afternoon sun. Then a sliver of light stabbed downward at the big man working five hundred yards away.

He had no warning. One moment he



"I'll give you just twenty-four hours to turn up that killer," McClain warned. "After that, I'm going after him myself—if I have to set the whole Strip on fire!"

"Put that gun away and get out of here," Coral cried.

A Wildcatter Saga, by MAX KESLER

was sweating with a section of six-inch casing. The next a blinding glare bounced off the casing full into his eyes. Then it was too late—and he knew it.

Caught completely by surprise, only his mind continued to function with trapped desperation. If only Kim was here, he thought. But then Kim was in far-off Pennsylvania. And he, Tod Winters, was as good as dead unless . . .

His Winchester was propped against a girder behind him. If he could manage to get his hands on it . . . For a big man he moved with remarkable speed Spinning, he scooped up the .30-30, dropped to one knee and slapped it to his shoulder.

The light blazed in his eyes, blinding him. As he threw up one hand against the glare, a steel-jacketed bullet smashed through his skull—and an inky blackness exploded deep inside his brain.

He fell straight forward—not hearing the sharp crack of a rifle whiplash across the prairie.

Up in the hills, the light blinked out. . . .

* * *

Reining up, Kim Overby tensed as a brilliant pinpoint of light suddenly throbbed atop the timbered hills to the east. For perhaps ten seconds it pulsed and quivered. Then it was gone. An instant later, he heard the *spang* of a rifle.

With a tight rein on the bay, Overby sat motionless, his pale gray eyes scanning the hills. One hand slid the carbine from its boot. His feet eased out of the stirrups. He realized only too well his danger.

"Remember, Kim," the Old Man had warned him. "That damned light spells death!"

Overby *was* remembering. That was why he didn't move now. He had no desire to die just yet. For five minutes he waited, but the light didn't flash again. Evidently the rifleman hadn't seen him. Satisfied that the danger was past, Overby headed toward the derrick thrusting up against the skyline.

The Old Man had been right, he reflected grimly. That light *did* spell death! Perhaps before this job was finished it might even spell his own name.

THE sun was still above the hills when Overby reined up before the derrick. Tight-lipped, he stared down at the dead man.

The body lay sprawled face downward on the rig floor. Above and to one side of it, the see-saw movement of the walking beam continued monotonously

Slowly, Overby dismounted. One look at the sticky mess around the man's head—or what remained of it—was enough. With that light blinding him, the poor devil had never had a chance to use the Winchester in his hand.

Bending, Overby rolled the body over—and his fingers froze on the limp shoulder. A full minute he remained thus staring down at the blood-smeared face, with the sound of his own breathing harsh in his ears.

After a moment he straightened. He felt numbed and suddenly very old. He hauled out tobacco and papers and built a cigarette. His hand was shaking so that he spilled half the golden flakes. But by the time he struck a match, he had the hand under control.

He dragged deeply on the cigarette, exhaled and looked toward a greasy knoll a hundred yards away. Sweat glistened on his face, sweat moistened the palms of his hands.

He ground the butt out under his boot and headed for the tool shack. He found a spade and strode toward the knoll. Damned if he'd haul him into town, dumped across his saddle like a sack of wheat! This way was best.

The earth was rich, black, sweet-smelling. Good earth. The spade sliced in cleanly. . . .

Standing bare-headed before the fresh grave, Overby thought bitterly, The Old Man should have known better. As a team we were unbeatable. If we'd been working together this wouldn't have happened. But we weren't—and it did. Damn!

Turning, he made his way back to the rig. There was a new hardness in him now. Before, this had been merely another job. Now it had become a personal thing—a cold, inexorable determination He wanted no prisoner. He wanted a man with the guts blasted out of him. A man who struck from behind a light.

The maddening *chug chug-chug* of the donkey engine driving the bit deeper and deeper into the earth snapped him out of it. He shut off the engine, doused the boiler fire and then, mounting, rode toward the town of Marlow. . . .

Hard-faced, Overby breasted the heavy flood of tank, casing, supply, freight and lumber wagons that surged through the town like a mighty flood.

About him, the air smoked with the blue vitrol of teamsters' curses, twenty-foot bullwhips cracked like pistol shots, dust roiled upward in choking clouds—and from the teeming, jostling crowds on the boardwalks rose a veritable Tower of Babel. It was like the buzz of a million bees mingling with the yapping of wild dogs.

Crude gas flares, spaced at irregular intervals, bathed the false-fronted buildings crowding the street with a weird glow. Building after building. . . .

Whitmore's Hardware & Genl. Mdse.... The Palmer House . . . Lu Chee's Restaurant . . . Lu Chee's Laundry . . . Oilmens' Supply House . . . E. C. Lindley, M. D. . . . Oilmens' Bank . . . The Drillers' Saloon . . . All were going full blast.

Reading those signs, Overby frowned. A boom town with a good fifteen hundred population. His job was going to be harder than he'd thought.

A killer, in many ways, was not different from other single men. He lived in hotels, ate in restaurants, drank when not on a job and threw money around on the honkytonk wenches.

If you were smart you didn't waste your time chasing him all over the hills. You simply stayed in town and waited for him to turn up. You hung around hotel lobbies, cafes and honkytonks—watching, listening. Sooner or later you spotted your man. After that you waited for him to slip. Then you took him.

But in a boomtown—with everybody well-healed and strangers pouring in every day—all he could do was hope for a break. Not to mention an honest sheriff. But according to Tod's reports the sheriff here was an enigma. Unable to figure him out, Tod had kept his Association connection a secret.

Abruptly, Overby reined in toward a small brick building. A sign above it read "Jail." A light showed through the window. Outlined against the light, he spotted a pair of boots propped up on a desk.

Dismounting, Overby flipped the reins over the hitchrack and crossed the porch.

THE man in the chair swiveled around as Overby entered. Slowly he uncrossed his legs and brought his feet to the floor. A pair of cool black eyes swept Overby's lean figure. "Yeah?" he said. "What's on your mind, fella?"

Standing there, Overby appraised him in silence. He took his time, remembering Tod's report of this man.

The sheriff was younger than he'd expected. Maybe thirty. And, if nothing else, built for action. A good six feet, he had the wide shoulders and slim hips of a boxer. His face was strong, the features standing out in bold, arrogant relief. The mouth was wide but thin.

Taken apart, piece by piece, the face told one nothing. Long ago, Overby had learned to distrust men with blank faces. Like Tod, he would not reveal his identity to this man.

"Okay, fella," the tall man said. "Come on—what's your trouble? I'm Lance Makin, the sheriff."

Overby introduced himself. Then, dropping uninvited into a chair, he gave Makin a steady glance. "Know a man by the name of Tod Winters?"

"Sure." The sheriff studied him narrowly. "Works for Coral Ames. Driller on her No. 1 Coral for the past two months. Why?"

"He's just been murdered."

Makin started. For an instant his mask shattered. Fear and surprise lay naked in his eyes. Then the mask quickly reassembled itself. "Cut it, Overby!" he said shortly. "Tod Winters was in town less than five hours ago."

"So?" Overby's voice was edged. "And I buried him less than *two* hours ago. Couldn't leave him lying out there on the rig for coyotes."

A strange stillness settled over Makin's face. "You around when it happened?"

Overby shook his head. "About a half mile away. All at once a light blazed up in the hills. Then I heard a rifle shot and the light disappeared. When I reached the rig, Tod was lying there with his brains blown out."

"Damn!" Makin swore softly. "Blinds them where they can't fight back, then drops them with a rifle. Never misses, either. Winters is the seventh so far. Funny thing, though. All the others have been—"

His eyes were suddenly wary. "How did *you* know it was Winters? You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

"Tod and me knocked around the Penn fields together for ten years." A tightness pinched Overby's voice. "He came out three months ago. I just arrived."

"Uh-huh." Makin rose and stared out the window for a moment. Then he said, "You get a look at the killer?"

His voice was casual, yet Overby sensed a strong tension in the man. And it puzzled him.

"At a half mile?" he said. "No. Nothing but the light."

Turning, Makin bent as though to pick up something behind the desk. When he straightened, there was a gun in his hand. His face was expressionless.

"You're clever, Overby," he said. "But you slipped up on one point. Every one of the six men killed before Winters was either a relative or an official of McClain Petroleum! Yet Tod Winters didn't even work for McClain!

"No, Overby." His smile was wintry. "This is *your* little job. You knew Winters in Pennsylvania, all right. Maybe you were even friends—until you quarreled. Probably a woman.

"Winters cleared out to avoid further trouble. You either traced him here or accidentally stumbled onto him. There was another argument, a fight and you killed him. Then you rode in here with a cock-and-bull story about the 'light killer' doing it. Right?"

For a second, Overby stared at the sheriff as though he was crazy. Then anger came surging up in him.

"Why, you damn fool!" He was out of his chair, his fists clenched. "If I'd killed Tod would I ride in and tell you about it? Hell, no, I'd have left him there for someone else to find! Use your head, man!"

"I am," Makin retorted coolly. "Drop your gunbelt, Overby. You're under arrest for Winters' murder!"

"Look, you're dealing with a—" Overby's voice chopped off. He'd come close to saying he was an Association man. But a sudden tense expectancy in Makin's eyes warned him. It was as though the sheriff had hoped to force him into an admission.

SHRUGGING, he unbuckled the heavy gunbelt, dropped it. He thought he caught a trace of disappointment in Makin's eyes. But he couldn't be sure.

"Now, turn around." Makin motioned with the .45. "And don't get any ideas,

Overby. I'd just as soon shoot you as hold you for trial."

Their eyes clashed, held for an explosive instant. Then Overby relaxed. He hadn't come to the Strip to die in an attempted jailbreak.

"I don't figure you, Makin," he said levelly. "You can't make this crazy charge stick and you know it. Just what is your game, anyway?"

"Game?" The sheriff's eyes flickered. "My game is the catching of criminals. What's yours, Overby?"

Ignoring the question, Overby turned and walked down a short corridor, into a cell.

As Makin clanged the door shut and locked it, Overby looked him straight in the eyes.

"You're either a damn fool, Makin," he said, "or a man playing a deep game. Personally, I don't think you're a fool."

"Thanks," Makin said dryly. "And I don't think you're a driller. Just a little too smart. But this game I'm supposed to be mixed up in, tell me about it."

"I haven't quite figured it out yet," Overby said.

Tension edged Makin's laughter. "While you're doing it," he said, "do you want to contact anyone? A lawyer, a friend—or maybe a boss. It's your legal right."

"I won't need a lawyer," Overby retorted. "I don't have any friends here. And how can a man who's just hit the Strip have a boss? Get the hell back to your office, Makin! Come back when you're ready to release me!"

A baffled look crept into Makin's eyes. He hesitated, then shrugged and went back to his office. A moment later the front door closed. The sheriff had gone out.

Thoughtfully, Overby crossed to the barred window. Shouts, curses and the gay tinkle of a woman's laughter floated in to him. From somewhere, he could hear the

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BLUE STAR Blades are Sharper, Longer-Lasting because they are ground and honed in oil.

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stomp of booted feet keeping time to a blare of music.

Death struck from behind a light, he reflected. Men died. A whole territory was on the brink of bloody war. And still the living drank a riotous toast to life. It was not a healthy reaction. Sensitive to surroundings, Overby felt a throbbing pulse of fear, a threat of disaster flowing through the atmosphere.

Dropping down on the cot, he lit a cigarette and let the past sweep through the channels of his mind. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Boomtown Queen

HIS friendship with Tod Winters had dated back to '88 when both had answered an advertisement in a Tideout newspaper.

> Wanted: Young, energetic man with brains, courage and a thorough knowledge of the oil game to act as an investigator. Interesting, exciting work. Opportunity for travel. Expenses paid. Good salary. Apply in person. National Oilmen's Protective Association.

Both he and Tod Winters had been gripped by wanderlust and a craving for excitement. Both had fulfilled all the necessary qualifications.

Unable to choose between them, Bill Curtiss—the Association's personnel man—had settled the problem by hiring both. It was a decision he had never regretted.

For with the expansion of the oil industry, the Association was flooded with requests for help from its members all over the country. Legal and technical aid—and just plain trouble-shooting.

As the staff of investigators had grown, he, Overby had become chief investigator with Winters as assistant.

From the first they had worked as a team. And, as such they had been unbeatable. Their reputation for solving anything from oil theft to murder became legend during their ten years of living, eating and working together.

Then three months before had come the urgent plea for help from Ord McClain, president of McClain Petroleum, one of the largest companies in the Cherokee Strip.

McClain had been brief and to the point. Within a five-month period, a brother, a brother-in-law and three company officials had been shot down by a rifleman striking from ambush. According to distant witnesses, the killer used a mirror or a bit of bright metal to blind his victims into helplessness before firing.

McClain suspected his competitor, Al Jensen, president of Jensen Petroleum. But without proof the moral responsibility for starting a bloody oil war would fall upon him. He didn't want to make a mistake.

But either those killings stopped or he, McClain, was going to do something about it. He could get no cooperation from the sheriff. And his own hands were tied.

"Send that famous team of yours out here," McClain had said, "and fast!"

The demand had caught the Old Man behind the eight ball. He had plenty of investigators available. But McClain was a powerful member; he'd wanted the best. Furthermore, it was a job that called for brains. A slip-up, a lack of diplomacy at the right time and bang—you had war!

At the time, Overby and Winters had been working on an important case in Kansas. If they were drawn off, the member would have howled to high heaven. So . . .

Remembering now, Overby almost hated the Old Man. For Bill Prentiss had done the next best thing; he'd drawn Tod Winters off the Kansas job.

Overby had protested vigorously. Hell, he and Tod had worked as partners too long. Teamwork spoiled a man for independent investigating. You got used to having your partner helping you figure out puzzling angles, correcting your mistakes and covering you in tight spots. In other

words, coordination replaced individual action. To send Tod on an assignment alone would be dangerous.

The Old Man had agreed. But, he'd pointed out defensively, an investigator's work was always dangerous. That's why they drew top wages. Besides, he had no choice.

So Tod had gone to the Strip alone, and run into a brick wall from the beginning. Within a week the killer had struck again. Another McClain official.

No signs, no clues, no ideas as to the murderer's identity. Only that he always struck on the hills where it was hard to track. That he used a mirror or something to dazzle his victims so they couldn't see to shoot. And that his skill with a rifle was incredible.

THEN a week ago letters had arrived simultaneously from Tod Winters and Ord McClain. Tod had sounded desperate. A nephew of McClain's had been the latest to die. Now McClain was threatening to wipe out the whole Jensen outfit. Jensen, a cool, shrewd man, protested his innocence and had warned that he would meet violence with violence.

The whole Cherokee Strip was in a state of armed truce, awaiting only the firing of the first shot to plunge into a bloody war to the finish. Winters had pleaded for help in his letter:

> For God's sake, Bill, send Kim out here! This thing is too big for one man. Jensen is definitely innocent. Last night I uncovered something so hot I can't even believe it. I'm not going to stick my neck out by saying what just yet. I've got to talk it over with Kim. Get him out here pronto!

McClain's letter had emphasized that last sentence in no uncertain terms

> Either turn up that killer within the next two weeks or, by God, I'll withdraw from the Association and blacklist you to hell and gone! Furthermore, there'll be the damedest war the Cherokee Strip's ever seen! Either me or Jensen—maybe both—will be pushing up daisies before it's over! I pay my dues on time. Now, by God, you produce on time, or else!

The Old Man hadn't liked that "or else." So Kim Overby had dropped everything and headed for the Strip. And even before he'd hit Marlow, he'd had the book thrown at him.

First, Tod's death—slapping him a terrible emotional shock. And then on top of that, either an incredibly stupid or an incredibly clever sheriff throwing him in jail charged with the murder of his best friend!

Within less than a day after his arrival, one Kim Overby was damn well behind the eight ball!

SWEARING, Overby dropped the burned-down cigarette from his scorched fingers. The pain jerked him back to the unpleasantness of his present situation.

Damn it, he couldn't figure Lance Makin out. Somehow, the sheriff had known Tod was an Association man. And now, through his, Overby's, friendship with Tod, Makin also suspected him of being an investigator.

But in that case, why all the secrecy? Why hadn't the sheriff come out and asked him, instead of trying to force his hand. An honest sheriff would have done so and then have offered to cooperate.

There was something funny about the whole deal. He had the feeling Makin knew something about the murders. Was Makin, himself, the "light killer?" Was he merely an accomplice? Or was he playing a deep game of his own? If so, what kind of game and how did it tie in with the killings?

Rising, Overby returned to the window. For a moment he stood staring out into the gas-lit night. Makin was an enigma. Shrewd, cool and thoroughly capable of murder if necessary.

For some reason, Tod Winters' death had shaken him badly. What was Makin afraid of? If he, himself, wasn't the killer,

was he covering up for the guilty party. And why? Finally, why had Makin jailed him, Overby, on a murder charge he knew wouldn't stick.

Yes, Sheriff Lance Makin was a strange man, a dangerous, baffling enigma.

Of only one thing was Overby certain now. Whoever the killer was, he had known Tod's purpose in the Strip. Only that could account for the fact that Tod alone, of the seven men who had died, had not been intimately connected with Ord McClain.

Somewhere, Tod had slipped—and it had cost him his life. But where and how?

Damn! Overby thought. If only he knew what Tod had found out the night he had written that last report! Had Tod guessed the killer's identity? What was it he had found out that was so incredible he couldn't believe it?

The answers lay in Tod Winters' brain alone—and Tod was dead.

Troubled, Overby went back to the cot. He lay there staring at the play of lights across the ceiling. He had never before realized just how much he and Tod had depended upon each other in this business.

But he knew it now. He knew how it felt to lie in a jail cell with a murderer running around loose, stirring up a war that would turn the Strip into a bloody battlefield. He could sense dark forces weaving a web around him, with no Tod somewhere outside to break the web.

Moodily, he lit another cigarette and lay there with the sounds of the night pouring in upon him until sleep came at last. . . .

* * *

The rattle of keys awakened Overby. He opened his eyes and stared blankly up at the barred windows. Then, remembering, he swung his feet abruptly off the iron bed and sat up.

A ruddy-faced deputy with straw-colored hair and mild blue eyes placed a tray on the floor and backed out again. Locking the door, he hesitated. "Better eat," he said. "Nothin' again until tonight."

Overby rose and stretched his lean six-foot frame. Pale gray dawn, carrying with it a thin, drizzling rain, streaked the sky outside. The cell was chill, damp and uncomfortable.

"What time is it?" he asked.

The deputy grinned. "What do you care? You ain't goin' nowhere. Except maybe to a necktie party!"

"Don't be so damned cheerful about it!" Overby retorted. But the man's good-humored face took the edge off his voice.

The deputy scratched his nose with a stubby finger and stared at him reflectively. "Maybe I'm just dumb," he said. "But damned if I can figure out why Lance locked you up. Hell, ain't a jury in the country will convict you. And Lance knows it. What'd you do to get him on your tail anyway?"

Dragging out makings, Overby built himself a cigarette. Over a match flame, he gave the deputy a steady glance. "You'll have to answer that," he said. "I never saw Makin before last night."

The deputy shook his head. "Don't ask me why Lance does anything," he said. "Always been hard, but a good sheriff. But ever since these killings started, he's changed. Won't talk, and acts if he was walkin' on glass."

"Tell me, Jack." Overby took quick advantage of the man's half-friendly manner. "When will I get a trial?"

"Names Turner—Bob Turner," the deputy said, and ran the stubby finger across his nose again. "Don't know. Lance says he wants to check on you. Two weeks, maybe."

"Two weeks!" Overby swore. So that was it: time! Whatever game the sheriff was playing had a ways to go. And suspecting him, Makin intended to keep him locked up until things were finished. Then he'd release him for 'lack of evidence'.

Hell, Overby thought bitterly, he might

as well be back in Tideout for all the good he was doing here!

True, he could contact the Old Man and gain his release. But then that would destroy his usefulness here. No, he was trapped.

"Don't like it, eh?" Turner grinned. "Let you in on a secret. Two to one you'll be out of here before you finish eating! Saw Coral Ames talking to Lance down the street a few minutes ago. When she finds out you were Tod Winters' friend, she'll take the jail apart to get you out. She was fond of Tod."

Coral Ames! Overby's heart leaped. It was she for whom Tod had been working to cover up his real activities. Tod had been killed on her lease. If she were to help . . .

"Tell me, Bob," he said, "what's Coral Ames like?"

The deputy grinned. "Ain't no words to describe her," he said. "You'll have to see her to—"

The front office door banged and a woman's angry voice echoed down the corridor. "I don't give a damn what *you* think, Lance!" she said. "Kim Overby was Tod Winters' best friend. I'll testify to that. Charge him with murder and people will—"

"Now look, Coral!" Lance Makin's voice was tight. "You don't even know who he—"

"Don't you 'look' me, Lance!" Coral Ames voice was dangerously soft now. "If you know what's good for you, you'll release him. Now! And when you do, send him over to the Gusher. I want to talk to him. Now move!" The door slammed.

"You're as good as out!" Turner grinned at Overby. "Me, I'd better get back to—"

"Turner!"

"On my way!" the deputy called.

"Bring the prisoner with you!"

Unlocking the cell door, the deputy whispered, "Told you so! Hell, Coral Ames could wrap the devil himself around her little finger. Or beat him at his own game, one! Let's go!"

LANCE MAKIN was seated on the edge of his desk when Overby and the deputy entered. His eyes were enigmatic. He gave Overby a crooked smile and handed him his gunbelt.

"Don't get ideas, Overby," he said. "Coral Ames didn't convince me. I'm just giving you the benefit of the doubt. If you're smart, you'll clear out of the Strip. It might be wise."

Crushing his hat down over thick black hair, Overby said, "Marlow's a boom town. I like it. I intend to stay. Be seeing you, Makin."

A tiny muscle twitched at Makin's mouth. "It's free country," he said, shrugging. "But remember, Overby—*someone* killed Tod Winters. Could be they'll gun for you next."

"Threatening me, Makin?" Overby said softly.

"As a law officer," Makin said evenly, "I'm warning you in your own interest. Why should I threaten you?"

"You can best answer that!" Overby retorted, and headed for the door.

As he stepped outside the sheriff called after him, "By the way, Coral Ames wants to see you at the Gusher. Just tell the bartender who you are."

Without replying, Overby headed down the boardwalk. He was wondering why and how Coral Ames had gained his release. How did she know he hadn't lied about him and Tod being friends? That he hadn't, as Makin charged, murdered Tod Winters? After all, she had not seen him, much less talked to him.

He was still wondering as he turned into the Gusher.

The Gusher Saloon would have done justice to a town three times the size of Marlow. Plenty of money had gone into the seventy-five-foot bar, the gleaming mirrors and the gambling equipment.

As he crossed the room, Overby noted a polished dance floor and a horse-shoe-shaped stage with a bandstand below—vis-

ible through a low, arched doorway to the left.

So Coral Ames was an entertainer, he thought. A dancer or perhaps a singer. That explained her hold on the sheriff. Even a man like Makin could lose his head over a beautiful woman.

Early though the hour was, a half dozen men were drinking at the bar. Overby gave a stocky bartender his name and said that Miss Ames was expecting him.

Evidently she was, for the bartender jerked his head toward a spiral stairway that led to the second floor. "Upstairs First door."

Nodding, Overby went up.

At his knock, a woman's voice said, "Yes, come in."

Just inside, Overby paused. He got an impression of space, warmth, luxurious furnishings and a large rain-streaked window giving a glimpse of the leaden sky outside.

Then he saw the girl seated on a low couch—and understood the deputy's remark: *You'll have to see her!*

Copper hair shimmering with a thousand hidden lights. Skin the color of rich cream Full lips. Crystal green eyes. And matching the color of those eyes, a crinoline dress that flowed smoothly over the hills and valleys of her slender figure. A jade necklace pulsed at her throat.

God! Overby thought. She was fire and ice. Hurricane and calm. Beauty and strength. And in these surroundings—*a queen.*

The green eyes met his steadily. The lips curved, revealing small, white teeth. With a graceful move, she rose, and he noted that she was taller than he had thought.

"Come in, Kim," she said, giving him her hand. "You don't mind if I call you Kim? Tod spoke of you so often, I already feel that we're old friends."

"After getting me out of that jail," Overby said, "you can call me anything you wish. Only I'm still—"

"Only you're still wondering why I did it." Coral Ames motioned toward the sofa. "Sit down, Kim, and I'll explain."

Filling two glasses from a decanter on a small table, she dropped down beside Overby. "From my own private stock," she said—and handed him a glass.

IT WAS good bourbon, Overby thought. The kind to go with these surroundings. Somebody was paying high

"You're wrong, Kim," Coral said coolly. "I pay my own way. You see, I own the Gusher."

Overby flushed, realizing that she had read his mind Still Coral Ames couldn't be more than twenty-seven. Where had she gotten the money for a place like the Gusher? And then there was that oil well.

Leaning back, she looked at him over the rim of her glass. "It didn't come easy, Kim," she said "For seven years I worked my own vaudeville act back east. Finally, with a five-thousand-dollar stake, I went into this business. Small places at first in boomtowns. Closing down just before the crash and moving on. I made money, big money. Six months ago I bought the Gusher Marlow's a permanent field. I'm staying here."

Overby regarded her with frank admiration. "Is there anything you want you don't get?"

Slowly she turned those green eyes upon him Only they were smoldering fires now.

"No, Kim," she said. "Not if I want it badly enough."

Abruptly she placed her glass down and switched the subject. "We've both been avoiding any mention of Tod," she said. "But we might as well face it. His death was a terrible shock. I was fond of him. If I seem cold about it—well, I don't always show my feelings."

She hesitated, then went on. "Getting you out of jail wasn't as impulsive as it seemed. You see, Tod talked about you a great deal. Weeks ago, I knew how you

looked, how you thought, what you liked, what you didn't like . . . all about you.

"So when Lance Makin told me he was holding a man by the name of Kim Overby for Tod's murder, I knew he'd made a mistake. If there had been any trouble between you and Tod, Tod would have mentioned it. And since you were his friend, I had to help you.

"As to how I did it—" The green eyes hardened. "Men like me, Kim. More than that, they fear me a little. Even Lance. I'd have taken his jail apart if he hadn't released you—and he knew it. So here you are."

She made it sound easy. But Overby was still grateful, and told her so. "You've given me a chance to settle with Tod's murderer," he said. "I couldn't have done it in jail."

Coral's face was suddenly very still. Reaching for a small lacquered box, she offered Overby an imported cigarette. She took one herself. When he had lit it, she inhaled, shot smoke out through pinched nostrils and frowned.

"Did it ever occur to you, Kim," she said, "that whoever killed Tod might also want you out of the way for the same reason?"

"What reason?" Overby said calmly. "Just why *was* Tod killed?"

Flicking the ashes from her cigarette, Coral looked him straight in the eyes. "Perhaps because he found out who the 'light' killer was—and had to be silenced."

Caution was second nature with Overby. He didn't drop it now. He shook his head.

"Tod wasn't the kind to play detective. Him, trying to track down a murderer? Uh-uh. It doesn't make sense."

Color flooded the girl's cheeks. "Then just why was he alone—of the seven men killed—not in any way connected with Ord McClain!"

She was very close to Overby now, her eyes, a clear sea-green, searching his face intently. *"Kim—just who and what was Tod Winters?* Oh, I know—he was a driller. But then he was something more than that. His speech, his manner, the way he carried himself, they didn't just add up to 'driller.' What was he doing here, Kim?"

CAREFULLY, Overby ground out his cigarette. A warning bell was ringing back in his mind now. Since he was obligated to this girl, he didn't want to lie. But he had to.

"Winters wasn't his real name," he said. "What it was doesn't matter. As to who he was . . . you've heard of Black Sheep. Well, Tod was the Black Sheep son of a Pennsylvania oil millionaire. He didn't like the place where he was born. He wanted to stand on his own. So he ran away from home when he was seventeen.

"Helping blaze new frontiers appealed to him more than being a social parasite. Tod came out here because the Strip is a new field, raw and untamed. You're right; he was different."

Smoke from Coral's cigarette spiraled up between them. Suddenly she rose and stood staring out the window. "That still doesn't explain why he was killed." There was a suppressed tension about her.

Overby frowned.

"If I knew why," he said grimly, "I'd know who killed him. And once I find that out—"

His hate was a pulsing, throbbing thing that filled the whole room.

The girl didn't move. Watching the play of light on the molten copper that was her hair, Overby found himself wondering if she realized just how beautiful she looked standing there. And if it was perhaps a deliberate pose for a purpose.

It would be very easy to forget Tod, the murderer, everything save this woman who stirred him as no woman had ever stirred him before. Was she, like Makin, playing a game?

"Kim?" He caught the barest quiver in her voice.

"Yes?"

"You lied to me just now," she said. "You're suspicious of me asking so many questions. Aren't you?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "In a way. And I shouldn't be. Not after the way you've helped me."

She stiffened and he sensed that he had hurt her. Yet he had not wanted to.

"Kim, you know the reason Tod was killed," she said, her back still to him. "I don't. I only know that you're holding back something—and that I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" Overby didn't get it. "Of what?"

"Of—of—" Suddenly she turned, the move bringing her almost into his arms. A slow flush spread upward from her bare shoulders to touch her face. She was breathing quickly. Her lips were half parted.

"You fool!" she whispered, slipping her arms around his neck. "Can't you understand? Or do I have to tell you? If anything were to happen to you, Kim, I'd—I'd die!"

He couldn't believe it, not even with her arms around him and those red lips brushing his own. Coral Ames—fire and beauty—in love with him!

He swept her close, crushing her soft, yielding lips with an almost savage hunger. For a brief moment, time, surroundings, everything save sensation faded . . . and only the two of them remained real.

Then gradually a measure of sanity returned. What a damn fool! he thought. Within half an hour a woman like this tells me she loves me—and I almost believed her! I—

Coral pushed him gently away. "*Now* do you understand? Weeks ago, I fell in love with a man I'd never seen—just by hearing Tod talk about you."

PLAY along with her, Overby told himself. Find out just what her game is. But keep remembering Tod or she'll make you forget. You'll be talking, as Tod must have talked. And then you'll end up with your brains spattered out!

"Yes," he said very softly. "I see."

A shadow crossed her face and her hands tightened on his arms.

"Kim, let the law handle this thing," she said. "It's too late to help Tod now. Please, for my sake, leave the Strip. Now—before it's too late. Promise me, darling."

Overby's face hardened into a series of sharp planes and angles. "Tod was my best friend, Coral," he said. "He was shot down without a chance. I'm staying here until I get the killer."

"Don't be a fool!" Coral's voice was tight. "You don't even know who you're hunting! But the murderer knows you—or will soon! Kim, you've got to go away! As soon as I can sell out here, I'll come to you. I love you, darling. Promise me you'll leave."

Almost roughly, Overby shoved her away. He stared out at the gray, dripping sky, with the sweet smell of her strong in his senses.

He tried to tell himself that she really did love him. Who was he to say that love couldn't happen the way she had claimed? He wasn't sure yet, but he thought he loved her.

As for his leaving the Strip—she was right. If he stayed, he'd end up the way Tod had—with a rifle bullet in his brain. And even if he did get the murderer, that wouldn't bring Tod back.

And the Association? To hell with the Association! If it hadn't been for the Old Man, Tod would still be alive. Besides, the Strip had a sheriff. Let Makin handle it. And if he couldn't, or was mixed up in it himself, then let them get someone else. He didn't owe them his life!

Yet he knew that it was no use. If he walked out now, if he betrayed Tod, the Old Man and the Strip, he'd hate himself as long as he lived. No woman was worth that. Especially if she was, herself, perhaps the—

Coral stiffened and drew away. He knew that she had read her answer in his face. For an interminable moment, she looked at him, her green eyes frozen. Her red lips thinned.

"I'll not throw myself away, Kim," she said, "on a man who places revenge above me. Nor will I live from day to day wondering just when they'll bring you in dead. It's not fair, Kim, and you know it."

She was damned clever. He could almost believe her. Almost but not quite.

"I know a lot of things I didn't know when I came up here," he said dully. "Sorry, Coral, but you've lost."

"Well, that's that." She gave him a wry smile. "The one thing I really wanted, I didn't get. They say that, given time, you can forget anyone. Perhaps. Good-bye, Kim."

There was nothing he could say, Overby thought. Not a single, damn thing. For some day he might have to put a bullet through her flat little belly. He didn't know yet.

Picking up his hat, he started to leave. As he opened the door, Coral said, "Kim!"

"Yes?" He turned, holding his breath.

"Kim, I tried to save you," she said quietly. "Remember that. Don't ever forget it."

No, he thought, I'll never forget. I'll never forget the way you look standing there now—with your hair like molten copper and those green eyes. . . .

Gently, he closed the door behind him—and it was like closing the door on his life.

CHAPTER THREE

When Feudists Meet

NEWS of Tod Winters' death circulated rapidly. By five o'clock everyone in Marlow knew about it—and all the details. The sheriff had arrested Winters' best friend. Carol Ames, convinced of Kim Overby's innocence, had threatened to tear the jail down unless he was released. As a result, Overby was now free.

The story grew with the telling. But one fact remained a grim reality. For the first time, the 'light' killer had struck at someone besides Ord McClain's outfit.

Growing uneasiness crept into the saloons and business houses. Men gathered in little knots on the streets. Now that McClain was apparently not the only target, who would be next? And why? Neighbor stared at neighbor, wondering, Is he the killer? A dark cloud of distrust descended upon the town and with it a hair-trigger tension.

Some believed Jensen guilty and were muttering, "Let's get him!" Others replied, "Try it and see what happens!"

During the day, Jensen and McClain men kept to opposite sides of the street. Al Jensen was doing everything possible to avoid an open break. Neither he nor McClain showed in town.

Meanwhile, with all Marlow demanding that he do something, Makin was scouring the hills with a posse. What had been purely a McClain problem before was now the concern of the entire Cherokee Strip.

Moving in and out of saloons, Kim Overby quietly listened and observed. There was a lot of talk, but none that provided the faintest clue. Shady characters there were, yet their game was not murder.

Motive. It was the key to everything, Overby knew. A key he couldn't find. With it, he could have broken the case in hours.

Now was when he missed Tod most. One day, with their heads together, and they'd have come up with the answer. Perhaps Tod had discovered it alone.

Damn! Just what had Tod found out?

Overby was stumped. He had only two slender leads—neither directly indicating the murderer. The first: Lance Makin. Yet a quiet check revealed Makin had hit the Strip less than a year ago with a good record as a sheriff in Ohio. Before that time he'd never been in the Strip.

If that was true, then there was little likelihood that Makin and McClain had ever met before. No, the revenge motive just wasn't there.

And as for Al Jensen, Tod, himself, had written the oil man off the books as innocent. Which was good enough for Overby That left exactly no one. Yet a killer was still running loose, waiting to strike again.

No one? Overby wasn't kidding himself There was still Coral Ames. Only he didn't want to think about her—yet.

He stayed clear of the Gusher. It wasn't easy. Not when he knew he had only to go to Coral and say, "I'm leaving, darling," and she would come into his arms.

During the afternoon he saw her on the street and ducked into a store to avoid a meeting. Once he faced her again, he'd forget Tod, the killer and everything else save her. So damned easy. So double-damned hard to stick it out!

After she had passed, he went back outside. His heart was still pounding. He hesitated, then headed for the Drillers' Saloon. He'd already drunk more today than in the past week.

To hell with it! he thought savagely. So I'm drinking too much! So what?

Tight-lipped, he shoved through the batwings. . . .

THE gas flares had sprung up along Main Street when Overby emerged from the Driller. For three hours he had been watching and listening, but drinking little. After the first couple of shots he'd realized liquor wasn't the solution.

The shock of Tod's death, plus his trouble with Carol, had shaken his confidence in himself for a while. But that was past now. His mind was clear; he knew his next move.

So far he'd made no attempt to contact Ord McClain. If the 'light' killer suspected him of being an Association investigator, any such move would confirm those suspicions. Then one Kim Overby's brains would be spattered over the landscape.

But now, he realized, further delay was dangerous. The tension was mounting. Already half a dozen fist fights had broken out between Jensen and McClain men. Before the night was over tempers might flare uncontrollably and guns flame in the dark. Time was running out.

He had to see McClain, to try and talk some sense into the man's head. If he could get McClain to publicly state his belief in Jensen's innocence, things would calm down. If not—

Slowly, Overby worked his way through the crowd. His objective was McClain's home, a big white mansion high up on a slope overlooking the town. McClain had built with the idea of permanency. The house was a concrete expression of his faith in the town as well as the Strip.

As the crowd thinned, Overby suddenly ducked into a side street, slipped between two buildings—and waited. If he was being followed, now was the time to find out.

Seconds passed. Half a minute; a minute. Nothing save the sound of distant music. Then suddenly the light tap of footsteps. A narrow shadow fell across the street side, hesitated. Then it moved on and the footsteps faded.

Relaxing, Overby dropped his hand from his gun. Just another woman on her way home. He slipped back into the street and headed toward the McClain mansion. And only then did the thought strike him.

The footsteps had been those of a woman. Had Coral Ames been following him? Was she, as he had feared, the 'light' killer after all? Or was she acting for someone else? And what was her connection with Lance Makin?

However, even if she was following him, it was too late to turn back now. Time was important. For either he calmed the fiery McClain down tonight or the next sunset might be a blood-red splash of violence and death.

Save for a light in a ground floor wing,

the big house was dark when Overby strode up the graveled path. Evidently McClain had sent his wife and daughter east, as rumored. Or—

"Get your hands up, fella!" A man stepped out of the shadows. A .45 gleamed in the moonlight. "And fast—if you want to keep breathing!"

Overby got them up.

So McClain had guards around the place. Effective—so long as he stayed inside. But that couldn't go on forever.

Circling, the guard relieved him of his gun. Then he snapped, "Turn around. Let's have a look at you." Then: "Say, you're Overby, that friend of Tod Winters'! What the hell are you doing here?"

A tall, lanky fellow with a nervous tic to his mouth, he sounded more puzzled than hostile. Overby remembered having had a drink with him earlier in the day. Name was Bart Adams.

"Look, I've got to see McClain, Adams," he said. "It's important."

The guard hesitated, then shrugged and handed Overby back his gun. "Guess it's all right," he said. "Since Coral Ames is behind you. Okay."

He led the way to the house. "Boss and Jensen are in there having it hot and heavy. You may have to wait."

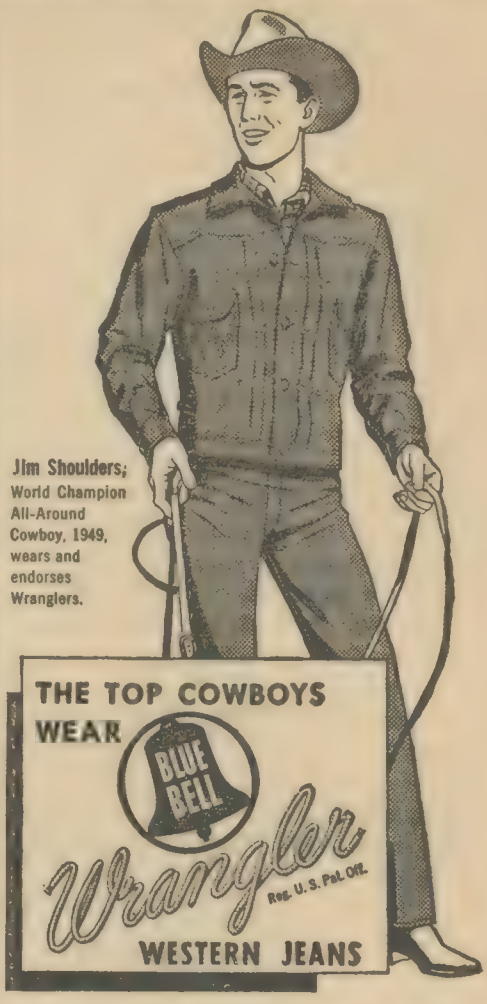
"Jensen here!" It was a break Overby hadn't expected. Now perhaps he could clear the air between the two of them.

"Yeah," Adams said. "Been here about half an hour."

Without knocking, he showed Overby inside. Evidently he was more than just a guard.

"Wait here," Adams said, and disappeared through an arched doorway to the left.

Plenty of money here, Overby reflected, looking about the huge paneled living room. A small fortune in furnishings. Original paintings, oriental rugs, a priceless silver coffee service. Yet compared to the expen-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sive simplicity of Coral Ames' place, it seemed gaudy, overdone.

He turned quickly as heavy footsteps crossed the room. Then he was staring at the man who had just entered.

Ord McClain was not merely big. He was a huge, tree-trunk giant of a man. Towering a good six feet five—broad-shouldered, deep-chested, craggy-faced—he radiated the raw power, drive and violence of those who forged empires out of wilderness.

Running a huge hand through a shock of flaming red hair, he studied Overby with shrewd gray eyes. "So my last letter lit a fire under Curtis' tail," he said harshly. "Wished to hell I'd sent it sooner. Might have saved young Winters."

His face darkened. "You got here too late, Overby. Jensen's here now—still trying to convince me he's innocent. But too many others besides me think otherwise. War's due to break out in the Strip any minute."

Nettled by the big man's abrupt manner, Overby said, "Jensen's doing everything he can to stop it. Why don't you try cooperating, McClain?"

McClain's face hardened. "There's only one way to deal with a killer, Overby," he said. "But if you want to talk to him, come on. He's in the study."

AS THEY entered the study a small, wiry man with graying hair, keen eyes and hawk-like features whirled to face them. At sight of Overby, he frowned but said nothing.

"Kim Overby—Al Jensen." The big man's voice took on a cutting edge. "He's the one who killed your friend Winters."

Jensen shook hands with Overby. "Ord's got a fixation that I'm the 'light' killer," he said grimly. "I can't seem to change his mind."

"Fixation, hell!" McClain's craggy face reddened with anger. "I know damn well you are!"

Jensen's keen eyes swung on him. "Then why not just make it a man-to-man fight, like I've tried to get you to do?" he challenged. "Instead of dragging the whole Strip into a bloody war!"

He stood with his hands in his pockets, his lips curling. "I'll tell you why! Because you're a stubborn, bull-headed fool who knows he's made a mistake but won't admit it!

"Tod Winters believed me innocent and told me he was writing the Association to that effect. The sheriff won't arrest me because he says there's no evidence. But as far as you're concerned, they're all wrong and you're right!"

He turned, his eyes meeting Overby's squarely. "I know you're an Association man, too. And if you want to check me again, go ahead. I'll cooperate any way I can."

"Cooperate!" McClain jeered. "The only way you'll cooperate will be to try and bump him off like you did Winters!"

"You used to have a brain, Ord," Jensen said dispassionately. "Why don't you try using it now?"

All this talk was getting them nowhere, Overby realized. Jensen's level-headedness impressed him. The little man obviously was not afraid of McClain. He was simply trying to avoid a bloody war.

Too, what Jensen had said about settling their trouble man to man—if McClain *really* believed him guilty—made sense. Why drag the whole Strip into it?

Clearly, McClain was a violent, hot-headed man who jumped to conclusions and then refused to admit he was wrong. But because he was a powerful figure in the Strip, he had to be calmed down before he blew the lid off things.

Dropping into a chair, Overby studied McClain with appraising eyes. "Let's talk sense for a change, McClain," he said bluntly. "You're dragging the whole Strip into a purely personal problem. Because, with the exception of Tod Winters, every

man killed has been either a relative or an official of your company. That's no way to handle things."

McClain scowled. "Look, I appealed to the Association, didn't I? And what happens? Nothing! Except that Winters was killed—and the murderer's still running around loose! Hell, man, my time's running out!"

"Why would Jensen want to kill you and your friends?" Overby said. "You just can't go around accusing him because you can't find anyone else. There's got to be a motive."

"Motive?" The big Irishman laughed harshly. "He's got the best motive in the world. With me and my top company men out of the way, he could take over the entire Strip! Become a regular dictator—an oil hog! What better motive than that?"

HE HAD calmed down now and was displaying a shrewd line of reasoning. One that could have carried weight.

"None," Overby admitted. "Except that Tod Winters checked Jensen from A to Z. And Tod was a top investigator. Yet he cleared Jensen in his last report. Unless you've got new information to the contrary, I'm accepting that."

"Get this, Overby." McClain's gray eyes were smouldering. "I'm not out after Jensen's hide just for the hell of it. But if he's not guilty, then, by God, who is the killer? So far, you've done a lot of talking but you haven't produced a damn thing! Not even a clue!

"All right—" His granite jaw thrust forward aggressively. "I'll give you just twenty-four hours to turn up that killer. If you haven't, I'm gunning for Jensen here. Because I know he's guilty!

"But making it a personal fight still won't stop war in the Strip. We've both got too many friends. The minute the first shot is fired the whole Strip will blaze up. Still, twenty-four hours I'll give you—but no more!"

Twenty-four hours! Overby knew it wasn't enough.

"You're under a hell of a lot of pressure, McClain," he said earnestly. "I know that. But suppose you go off half-cocked, kill Jensen and start a bloody war—and these killings still go on?

"You'll know then you killed the wrong man, McClain! And with that on your conscience, you'll be finished. Not only with yourself but with the Strip. You want that to happen?"

McClain's great, shaggy eyebrows pulled down. He scowled at Jensen, searching the little man's hawk-like face.

"You know damn well I couldn't hit the side of a barn with a rifle, Ord," Jensen said dryly. "Why don't you admit you've got the wrong bull by the tail, and let go?"

"How do I know that?" McClain retorted. "Besides, you're the only man with a motive."

"That you know of," Jensen reminded him calmly. "How about those you don't know about? You've hurt plenty of people in your life, Ord."

"He's right, McClain," Overby said. "This is a clear-cut revenge pattern. Tod Winters realized that. And the night before he died he found out something damned important. When the murderer realized Tod was closing in, he killed him."

"What!" Cold light leaped into McClain's eyes. "Why didn't you say so before? What did he find out?"

Overby shook his head. "That's what I'd like to know. But whatever it was died with Tod. Yet, McClain, the key to everything is still locked up somewhere in your subconscious mind. And believe me, man, a lot of lives depend on your remembering."

Looking at the big man, he experienced a sense of desperate urgency. He had just stated a maddening truth and knew it only too well.

"You've got to think, McClain!" he said. "You've got to go back over your life with a fine-tooth comb. If you've ever had

serious trouble with anyone, a bad business deal, a gun fight, a woman—anything—give me their names. We'll at least have something to work on."

"Damn it, how do I know who I've hurt!" McClain came to his feet angrily. "Hell, you can smash a man in this game without even knowing it!"

"And some, Ord," Al Jensen's voice was flat, "when you *do* know it. What about Jack Ames, Coral's dad? Killed when an air pocket flipped that torpedo out of the bore hole. Jack didn't have time to get clear."

HIS hawk-like features sharpened. "Remember, Ord? You knew it was dangerous. Yet you threatened to blacklist him throughout the Strip if he didn't go ahead and shoot that well. You killed him—same as if you'd put a bullet through him. And you go around accusing me of murder!"

McClain's heavy jaw corded. "That's a lie!" he snapped. "Jack just got a tough break."

Overby tensed. A cold hand suddenly clamped around his heart and hope became a dead, frozen thing within him.

Motive! Now he had the motive. A teen-age girl, brooding over the loss of her father. Building up a hatred for the man responsible. Returning to the Strip, after seven years in the East, to carry out her revenge.

Striking first at McClain's family and close associates. Driving McClain to the point where suspicion would make him gun down Jensen. For Jensen, his competitor, would be the man he would accuse. Then continuing to strike while Ord McClain slowly cracked under the knowledge that he'd killed an innocent man. Finally, murdering him, too.

That seven men had already died, that Jensen and scores of others might go down in a bloody war didn't matter.

"There's nothing, Kim, I don't get—if I want it badly enough. Nothing!"

And nothing you won't do to get it, Overby thought. As long as you get it!

He turned a numbed stare at McClain. "Clamp a lid on this trouble brewing, McClain," he said heavily. "And I'll have the killer by tomorrow night. Jensen just gave me the motive. That's all I needed."

"You don't mean—?" McClain's face was suddenly very still. "Hell, I can't believe it, Overby! But yet . . ."

"Coral Ames?" Jensen was on his feet. "You're crazy as hell, man! There's not a finer girl in the country!"

Overby's mouth was bitter. "That's what I was beginning to think, too," he said. "But revenge does strange things to even good people. It twists them inside. And Coral has the best revenge motive in the world."

"Damn you, Overby!" Jensen's nostrils flared. "You keep away from her! I've known her since she was a kid. Besides, McClain deserves killing!"

"And what about the seven who've already died?" Overby said harshly. "Did they deserve to die, too? You forget, Jensen, one of those men was my friend. I'm warning you. Stay out of this thing."

He picked up his hat. For a tense moment he looked at them with bleak gray eyes.

"I asked you to hold off this shooting war," he said. "Now I'm telling you. Keep your men off the streets and away from one another. Otherwise, you'll answer to me."

He left them standing there then; Jensen tense, angry. Ord McClain strangely calm, his face still thoughtful. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Lights Out

A BLAST of sound hit Overby as he entered the Gusher. Both the bar and gaming tables were operating full blast. A floor show was going on in the other room.

Tension was here. McClain and Jensen

men stayed away from one another. But the explosive danger was past for the moment. McClain had evidently ordered his men to lay off.

Overby's eyes ranged over the room in search of Coral. She wasn't there. As he headed for the stairs, the stocky bartender frowned but said nothing.

Upstairs, Overby knocked and waited.

Coral Ames flushed when she opened the door and saw him standing there. She was wearing a white satin dress with a low-cut bodice that left her creamy shoulders bare. She looked even more beautiful than before.

She hesitated, her green eyes searching Overby's face intently. She showed neither surprise, pleasure nor displeasure. "Come in, Kim," she said quietly.

There was the same warmth and simplicity about the place as on his previous visit. And despite the bedlam below in the Gusher, it was very quiet here.

Dropping into a chair, he watched her while she poured him a drink. And knew now that you could both love and hate a woman at the same time.

He had come here on the spur of the moment, not quite knowing what he would do. He was less certain now. Her strange aloofness disturbed him. He had thought she would try using her charms on him again. That she didn't, left him at a loss.

Lighting a cigarette, Coral stood looking down at him without expression. "So you found out about my father's death," she said coolly. "And you think I'm the killer."

Overby almost dropped his glass. How had she known? Then he was remembering those footsteps, the shadow cast down that side street. It *had* been Coral. And she had followed him to Ord McClain's place after all.

"You listened in at McClain's?" Overby smiled only with his mouth. "It never occurred to me that the killer might be a woman."

"You fool!" Coral's voice was bitter. "Yes, I followed you there, listened in and followed you back. Why? Because I'm still fool enough to love you! And I was afraid the killer would strike after you contacted McClain!"

SHE was incredibly lovely, Overby thought, looking at her. With that copper hair and green eyes and creamy expanse of shoulders gleaming in the soft light. Incredibly lovely—and incredibly evil.

Realizing that she knew everything, he frowned. It put him in a bad spot. What he now suspected and what he could prove were two different things.

"Cut it, Coral!" he said. "You followed me for one reason. To find out if I was an Association investigator. If I turned out to be, then I was to go the way Tod did."

Coral's lips curled. "And having found out, do you think I'd have let you get back here alive? That is if I was guilty and knew you suspected me? Don't be a fool! I'd have killed you on the way back!

"Or failing then, wouldn't I *now?*" She sank down on the sofa, one hand patting at the cushion. The hand came up holding a .45. "Just a little precaution. I keep a good deal of money up here, you know."

Her eyes bored into his. "It would be very simple to kill you, Kim—defending my honor. Nothing would happen if it came out you were an Association man. Even an investigator can have his weaknesses around a woman!"

"Why don't you?" Overby said. "You didn't hesitate about Tod. And if you don't—"

Yet what she had said was true. She could have shot him after he left McClain. The side street had been deserted. And certainly no one would have suspected her afterward. Furthermore, would she have tipped her hand here now?

Too, as she pointed out, it would be simple to get rid of him with no danger to herself. Why didn't . . . *Damn it, she was guilty as hell—and he knew it!*

"Go ahead," he taunted. "Or do you need your little mirror even at pointblank range!"

"Damn you, Kim!" she cried, and hurled the gun at him!

It smashed a vase behind Overby, spraying him with small glass splinters.

"Damn you to hell and back! Why do I worry about what happens to you! If you want to get yourself killed, go ahead! I—I—"

Suddenly then, her anger was gone. She wilted like a small child.

"Oh, Kim!" she said. "Kim, you idiot! Believe what you will. Charge me with being the 'light' killer. I'll confess to it—to anything! But for God's sake, darling, get out of the Strip!"

Overby's heart leaped. He knew human nature too well. Coral was not staging an act now. It was true. She could have killed him on the way back, but hadn't. A moment ago, she could still have done so. Instead, she was offering to confess to a crime of which she was innocent to get him to leave.

With a savage exultation he swept her to him. She met the fierceness of his kiss with equal intensity. And he knew now that it was love.

After a moment, he pushed her away. "Jensen said I was a fool. Even McClain found it hard to believe. But, darling, you did have a motive. That's what threw me off the track."

Carol kissed him again and said that he was forgiven. But then a tiny frown gathered between her eyes. "No, I didn't really have a motive, Kim," she said. "It's not like Al Jensen to lie. But he did lie—or at least twisted the truth—about my father's death.

"Ord McClain didn't threaten Dad unless he shot that well. Dad knew it was dangerous. But when McClain offered him a thousand-dollar bonus, he went ahead. And, just as McClain said, he got a tough break. I don't hate Ord McClain for what happened, and never did."

"Then that puts Jensen back in the spotlight," Overby said, frowning. "Why did he lie when he knew it put suspicion on you? Even though he did defend you afterwards."

Coral shook her head decisively. "Al was just probably trying to show McClain up in a bad light. But he isn't the killer. I'm positive of that."

Overby was completely at sea now. He had been certain of Coral's guilt. He was equally sure now that she wasn't guilty. Which left him without a suspect. And he had only twenty-four hours to find one.

TRUE, there was Jensen—and the sheriff, Lance Makin. But the motive? Jensen and McClain, although competitors, had never had any serious trouble. Otherwise McClain would have told him. Too, Tod Winters had cleared the little man.

As for Makin—Ord McClain, himself, admitted he'd never seen the sheriff until a year ago. Nor had there been any trouble between them since then.

Damn it, neither one of them had a motive for—

Suddenly the thought chopped off. Overby sat very still. In the curve of his arm, he felt Coral stiffen.

The door had opened so quietly that neither of them had heard until it was too late.

Lance Makin stood just inside the room. There was a .45 in his hand. He kicked the door shut. His cold eyes rested on Overby, and his mouth twitched.

"On your feet, Overby!" he said. "You and me are taking a little walk."

"Just a minute, Lance!" Coral was on her feet. "Even a sheriff knocks when he comes into my place. Now put that gun away and get the hell out!"

Makin spun on her. "You little fool!" he said. "You don't know what you've got yourself into! Kim Overby is an Association investigator!"

"So what?" Carol retorted. "I've known

that all along. And since you know it, too —what are you doing pulling a gun on him? You'd better talk fast, Lance!"

Makin looked at her steadily, with something very close to pain in his eyes. "Why try to bluff me, Coral?" he said. "I guessed the truth a long time ago. But I kept quiet, just as you knew I would, because I loved you. Why do you think I threw Overby here in jail the minute I suspected he was an investigator? To hold him until I could cover up for you."

"You — you mean — " Coral's eyes widened. "You mean *you* think I'm the killer?"

Makin shrugged. "Who else, Coral? You're the only one in the Strip with a strong enough motive. And now that Overby knows, he'll have to be gotten rid of. Otherwise—"

"How did you know I suspected Coral?" Overby cut in quickly. "Were you with Coral?"

"Ord McClain told me a few minutes ago," the sheriff said. "He was afraid you'd kill Coral because of Tod Winters' death. Maybe he was wrong, but I'm not taking any—"

"Ord McClain!" Overby came to his feet. "That loud-mouthed fool! He's probably shot off his mouth to everybody in town!"

Some things were clearing up now. Makin, in love with Coral and thinking her guilty, had made every effort to protect her. The sheriff had even thrown him, Overby, in jail to keep him off her trail. And all the while, Coral was innocent.

But McClain . . . McClain was beginning to get in his hair! The big man had known that he suspected Makin of being implicated. Yet still he'd gone straight to the sheriff and revealed his, Overby's connections. Endangered his life.

McClain must have known that the sheriff would lock him up to protect Coral —thus leaving the killer free to go on with his murders. Yet McClain was not stupid. It took brains to become the head of a big oil company. Violent, stubborn, hot-tempered, yes—but not stupid.

A dark suspicion was beginning to form deep back in his mind now. It didn't make sense—but then nothing made sense any more.

Had Ord McClain guessed that Makin would go even further to protect Coral? *Perhaps as far as murder?* And had that been his reason for going to Makin—rather than a professed concern for a woman he believed to be the killer? If so—

"—and that's the story, Lance." Coral's voice jerked Overby back to reality. She must have just finished explaining to the sheriff for Makin's face was very white.

Makin swung probing eyes upon Overby. His mouth thinned. He was silent a full minute. "If you're playing square with Coral, as she thinks," he said finally, "I'm with you all the way. Like a fool, I thought she was guilty. Now I know she's not. But if you're up to something, Overby, by God, I'll kill you!" Holstering his gun, he started for the door.

"Wait, Makin!" Overby said. "Where'd you see McClain?"

The sheriff turned, his eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because I'd like to ask him a few questions," Overby said grimly. "Maybe you'd like to hear the answers?"

Makin shrugged. "If you want to talk to him, he's downstairs at the bar. Come on."

As they went out, Coral slipped her hand in Overby's, but he was scarcely aware of it. A weird conviction was begining to take shape in his mind now—one so incredible that he could not yet accept it. He thought he knew now what Tod had found out.

But suspicion was one thing; proof another. And he didn't have one shred of proof.

WHISKEY glass halfway to his lips, Ord McClain stood with his back to the bar as Overby, Coral and Makin came

down the stairs. Towering above the crowd like a great oak, he watched their approach in silence.

Less than a foot away, Overby halted. For a long minute, he measured the big Irishman with pale gray eyes. His lips were compressed. McClain returned his gaze calmly.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut, McClain," Overby said harshly. "Why did you go to Makin anyway? Are you just a damn fool? Or—are you something else?"

For a man of violent temper, McClain was strangely calm now. He looked at Overby without expression. "Sure, I told Makin," he retorted. "I figured it was his job to make the arrest. Not for you to take the law into your own hands just because your friend Winters was one of those murdered. So what?"

A heavy, pregnant silence built up about them now. Men faded to the walls. The Jensen group to one side, the McClain group to the other. Only three remained where they were—next to McClain.

Guards, Overby thought. Or straight gunnies.

"So . . ." Overby's voice was velvet smooth. "The pieces are beginning to fall into place, McClain. You remember I told you the key to this case was locked up in your mind. It was. Only when you gave it to me earlier tonight, I didn't recognize it. Not until now. You see, it's a weird kind of key."

Not a muscle moved in McClain's craggy face. He downed his drink and signaled the bartender for another.

"What the hell are you getting at, Overby?" he rasped.

"Motive," Overby said coolly. "To begin with, I had three leads—none of them good. Al Jensen, whom Tod cleared. Makin, here, who, it turned out, had no possible motive. And, because of a misunderstanding about her father's death, Coral Ames. That fell through.

"Going further, I've checked on every rifleman in the Strip. It seems that you shoot circles around any of them. Furthermore, they didn't have the brains. The murderer is not just an ordinary man. He's intelligent, diabolically clever and cold-blooded as hell."

A chill had crept into Overby's voice. Beside him, Coral's fingers clamped nervously on his arm. Lance Makin was suddenly tense, watchful.

McClain started to say something, changed his mind and reached for his drink. His eyes were narrowed.

Overby met them squarely. "Ever since you called us in on this case, McClain," he said, "even after we cleared Jensen, you kept yelling for his blood. You had the Strip on the brink of a senseless war. So I started thinking, Why?

"And then I remembered what you said about Jensen. That he had the best motive in the world to get rid of you. For with you and your top company men out of the way, Jensen would control the entire Strip. He'd be a regular dictator. Right?"

Not until he had half emptied his glass did McClain reply. A dull flush suffused his face, his jaw thrust forward aggressively. Still, he kept his temper. "Yeah," he said. "And it's still a damn good motive."

"Not only for Jensen," Overby agreed softly. "But for his competitor. Jensen, however, doesn't want to become an oil king. He's satisfied with things as they are.

"But his competitor is a different sort. He's power mad. He wants the Strip under his thumb. Only Jensen stands in his way. Therefore, Jensen had to be removed.

"But how? If Jensen were killed, too many people would guess why and take action against the murderer. And he might well lose.

"But," and Overby smiled grimly, "suppose he started a series of killings apparently aimed at him? Suppose he made the Strip believe Al Jensen was the killer? Suppose he stirred up so much hatred that the country would take sides in the issue and a

bloody war flare up? If Jensen and his friends were killed off during the fighting—and he'd see to that—where would it leave him? Undisputed dictator of the Cherokee Strip! There's the motive, McClain, and—"

Without taking his eyes from the big Irishman, he said, "Get away from me, Coral—upstairs! And you, Lance, keep an eye on those three next to McClain."

"No need for that, Overby," said Al Jensen calmly. The little man had come in quietly through a back door. He stood some ten feet behind the three guards. He had a .45 in his hand. He said, "Go ahead with your business."

SO FAR, McClain had simply stood there, his elbows propped on the bar behind him. Just listening, his face an impassive granite mask. Now he shoved gently away from the bar. The action brought his hand close to his .45. He gave no sign that he had even heard Jensen.

"Why don't you come out with names, Overby," he said tightly. "Everybody in the Strip knows that Al Jensen and me control the country. You've cleared Jensen. That leaves—"

"Exactly." Overby's voice was like cracking ice. His eyes bored straight into McClain's. His own hand brushed the gun at his hip.

Around them, the silence became a living thing, with even the Gusher itself seeming to draw in a deep, shuddering breath. Facing one another across the room, the Jensen-McClain factions stared at one another, stunned.

Only Overby and McClain seemed unaffected. And even McClain was not entirely immune. A bright flush stained his face the color of his hair. Abruptly, he put down his glass. His eyes were narrowed slits. He was poised, trying to fight down the anger within him.

"Your brother and brother-in-law probably died to make it look more convincing," Overby continued inexorably. "Your five company friends perhaps because they guessed the truth. And Tod Winters"—his voice tightened; his eyes were gray ice—"Tod because he put two and two together and came up with *you*, McClain, as the killer! *Like me, he must have found that specially rigged rifle that you—!*"

McClain's hand was already sweeping toward his hip. "All right, boys," he yelled. "Get him!"

Seven guns flashed upward and began spraying leaden death! Al Jensen dropped one of the gunhawks the moment the play began. After that it was every man for himself.

Having goaded McClain into the move, Overby was set for it when it came. Even as McClain's huge fist flashed hipward, Overby was already drawing.

At ten feet it was pointblank range. A man either killed or died himself with the first shot. Overby's draw was a smooth blur of movement.

Three times he triggered as the .45 cleared leather. His first shot shattered McClain's gun arm, the next two punched neat holes in the big man's belly.

Although Lance Makin's gun was thundering beside him, Jensen's only a few feet away, and the last gunhawk was going down on his face, Overby was unaware of it.

Only McClain's huge, towering figure and craggy face, topped by the flaming red hair, interested him.

As the hot slugs drove home, a startled look leaped into McClain's eyes. Not pain, yet—just stark disbelief. As though he couldn't believe it was happening to him. Two heavy slugs in the belly. He knew he was as good as dead. Yet he refused to go down.

With his arm shattered, he had dropped his gun. But he still wasn't finished.

"Damn you!" he said hoarsely, and spreading those huge, gorilla-like arms, lunged for Overby. There was still enough strength in them to break a man's back.

At five feet, Overby fired two more for the belly. *Right where he'll die slow, Tod!*

AS THE first shot hit him, McClain stumbled, half doubled over. The second shot ploughed through his lungs. He tried to straighten, failed, went slowly to his knees. Yet a tremendous vitality kept him from falling on his face.

The gunfire had died away and now only a flat, maddening silence hung over the place. That and the wet, bubbling sound of Ord McClain's labored breathing. A few feet away, Lance Makin stood stiffly erect while a darkening stain spread across his fine gray shirt.

With a tremendous effort, McClain raised his great, shaggy head. He coughed, wiped the blood from his mouth with his sleeve and looked at Overby.

"How'd you find—that rifle? After Winters got wise, I thought I hid it—where no one—could find it."

Dying, with his dreams of power flowing out through his lungs, he unwittingly handed Overby the knife for the final twist.

And remembering Tod—lying sprawled on the derrick with his brains spattered out—Overby used it without mercy. Standing there, he smiled grimly down at McClain with eyes like winter ice. And then he gave the knife a twist.

"What rifle, McClain? You mean you really had one?"

An agonized fury leaped into McClain's eyes then. For he realized now that Overby had laid down a perfect bluff—and that he, McClain, had called it the wrong way!

Not only that, but he'd just admitted his own guilt before half the Strip. Not even his own men would avenge him when he was dead. He'd handed his empire to Al Jensen on a blood-stained platter—his blood!

Suddenly he gave a great cry, a crimson flood gushed from his mouth and he fell forward—a great, towering tree crashing downward because the heart of it was rotten.

For a moment, Overby stood there, staring down at the dead man. And the savageness which he had felt during the fight ebbed slowly from him. Now there was only the somber realization that justice had been served. And that he, Kim Overby, had been merely an instrument of Fate, whose purpose had been to make the Strip a better place in which to live.

With McClain dead, there would be no war.

Slowly he turned away. His job here was finished. And yet he would not go back to the Association. For, right or wrong, he knew that he could never forgive Bill Curtiss for sending Tod out here alone. Besides, he'd worked too long with Tod to ever take on another partner. No, he would stay—

"Kim!" Coral was in his arms, heedless of the crowd. "Kim, darling, are you all right? Kim!"

Her voice snapped him out of it. He looked about him, at the dead McClain, the three gunhawks piled up a few feet farther on and finally toward Lance Makin, being led outside to the doctor's office.

As Overby took a step to follow, Coral held him back. "No, Kim. He's all right," she said. "And he'd rather not see you. He's leaving just as soon as he can travel. You see, Kim, he loves me, too. He couldn't stay around with you and I—"

Understanding, Overby looked at her and, suddenly, nothing bothered him anymore. What the future might hold, he could not know. Nor did it matter. He had a respectable bank account, a good mind and a reputation that was tops in his field.

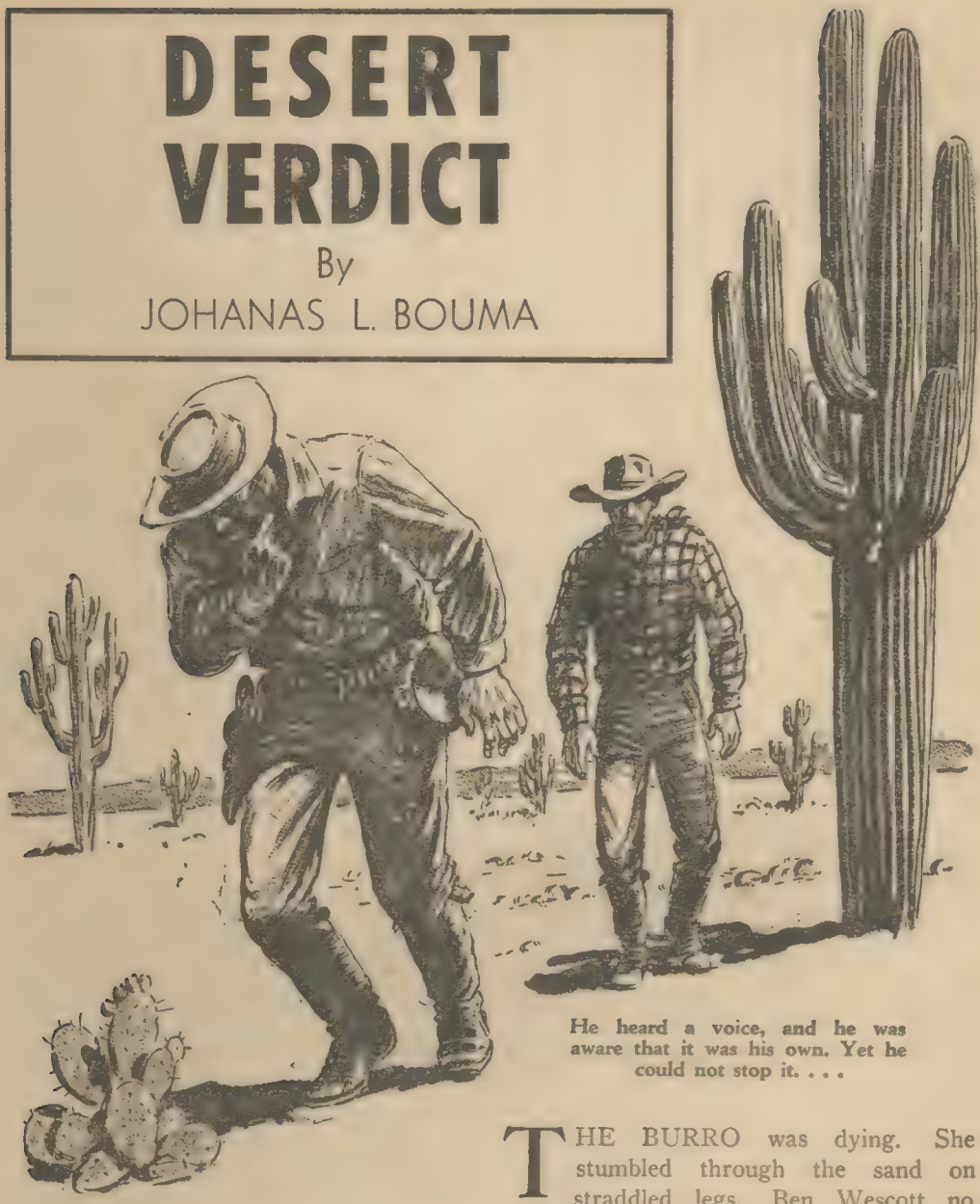
But more than that—he smiled down into Coral's warm green eyes—he had a woman with the fire, the courage and the love to make life worth living.

Gently, he slipped his arm around Coral and, together, they mounted the spiral staircase to the warmth and quiet above.

THE END

DESERT VERDICT

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA



He heard a voice, and he was aware that it was his own. Yet he could not stop it. . . .

The merciless desert sun would decide between them: Which one would come back to the lovely Francesca?

THE BURRO was dying. She stumbled through the sand on straddled legs. Ben Wescott no longer drove her to greater effort. She had never betrayed him, and it pained him to see her suffer. The burro swayed to a stop.

Tipping his hat, Wescott looked long at the distant mountains. Heat waves blurred the land, blemished by lava patches and arroyo scars. Here, distance was deceitful. As deceitful, Wescott thought bit-

terly, as the woman who was his wife. And as blurred as his hatred for the man who traveled with him.

Turning, Wescott watched the young man whom he had brought out here because an anxious father wanted it so.

"Jim's been home two months now," Dave Morgan had said. "Damn it, Ben, what kind of colt did I sire? I tell you what the boy needs is a good roughing! He's had it too easy in that fancy Eastern school. Take him to Rimrock Well and back. Let him learn what it's like to go all day without water. Maybe make a man of him!"

There were two things of which Dave Morgan had not been aware. One was that Wescott had been looking for just such a chance to get Jim alone.

The other was that the spring that fed Rimrock Well had run dry.

Wescott had learned that from a grizzled prospector the day before their departure from Hermosa. Field man for the Morgan Mining Company, he had been checking an outlying claim and had met the prospector on the way. He had known then that he meant to use the information to his own advantage.

He turned his attention to the burro as Jim Morgan dropped his pack with a complaining grunt.

"This is my idea of hell. Does it always stay hot this late?"

The sun had dropped behind the mountains, but its heat still gripped the desert. Wescott smiled faintly, his hand falling to shift the weight of the six-shooter at his waist. The burro's eyes were crusted nearly tight shut. Twisting the cork from the canvas water bag, Wescott poured a tin cup half full and held it under the burro's muzzle. She blew a little but did not take of the water. A tremor ran through her and she wheezed in breathing.

"An hour from now you'll be complaining of the cold," Wescott said. "You can't fight this country, boy. Don't try it."

"I sure as hell don't have to fight it. I've had enough. Let's head back."

Jim Morgan stood six feet, and there was no fat on him. Physically, he had the makings of a man, but the sullen expression on his dark, handsome face was that of a spoiled boy.

"You'll be running Dave's mines one of these days," Wescott said mildly. "Better learn all you can of this country."

"You can have it. If I'd known what I was letting myself in for, I'd have stayed back East."

WESCOTT'S wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. The country had branded him with the years, but there was no hint of gray in his reddish hair. He scrubbed the cup clean with sand, then unloaded the pack from the burro. He worked slowly and methodically, and when he had the campsite arranged to his satisfaction, he formed rocks into a circle and gathered brush for the fire.

Jim had stretched out on his blanket and was smoking a cigarette, and Wescott wondered with a queer anger why he didn't offer to help. Dave's fault, he decided. Anyway, part of it was Dave's fault. The young man had had everything handed to him for so long without conflict, that now he took it without question.

But there were some things a man couldn't allow another man to take without putting up a fight. And one of them was a wife.

Wescott measured water in the coffee pot and put it to boiling. Then he sliced bacon and filled the skillet. After it had fried some, he added canned beans to the hot grease. Night fell swiftly. They ate, talking little. After cleaning up, Wescott took a last look at the burro. Jim grunted good night and rolled up in his blanket. Wescott rolled a cigarette slowly and lit it, gazing into the fire.

The smell of brush smoke, the presence of the burro, the low-hanging stars—all

served to remind him of the long years he had roamed the desert, the gold fever moving him on, before he had married.

Francesca Hernandez was the daughter of an old and proud family. She was a lovely young woman, with large black eyes and a mane of dark hair about her shoulders.

It had not been easy to win her. He was thirty-six, she twenty, a fact that had not altered her love for him. But there had been many meetings with the inevitable chaperon present before the family consented to the marriage. In the end, however, the dark-haired girl and Wescott had found happiness.

The change had come with young Morgan's arrival from the East. Wescott had only to remember the way Jim's face had lighted up on first meeting Francesca, the hours they had spent together, the gay ring of their laughter, to feel the recurrence of his hatred. He told himself they were of an age, that outside of that it meant nothing. But as the weeks passed he sensed a gradual withdrawal in his wife, as if she had measured him against the younger man and found him wanting. More than once he had found her weeping quietly. In her dark eyes, raised to his, he had read a disturbance that tore at his heart. But he'd remained silent, accusing her with his eyes, afraid to speak, fearing to learn what he knew to be true. And ever his hatred for young Morgan mounted until he could scarcely suppress it. . . .

The fire had died and Wescott shivered and turned to his blankets. He looked at the hump of Jim's body as he unbuckled the gunbelt, and his heart pounded with a desire to kill. But he knew he could not kill in cold blood. He had never been one for violence. A sudden chill took him. He raised his head and tasted dust in a gust of wind. That the burro would surely die in a day or two was not his fault. Nor was it in his power to stop the sandstorms that threatened this time of year. Tomorrow they would reach Rimrock Well. Jim would be impatient to start back. All Wescott would have to do after that was put his trust in the desert. He had been born to it; it would not fail him. But Jim was weak, and the weak did not survive in this land that demanded much of a man. So there was no need for violence, Westcott thought. The desert would be his weapon. He wrapped his blanket around him and slept.

HE AWOKE with a sense of stiffness and ache, but his first glance was for the burro. She lay on her side, breathing heavily. Her eyes were crusted tight shut now, and strings of mucus ran from her nostrils. With an effort, she stood. Wescott offered water and washed her eyes. Her breathing rumbled.

Jim moved beneath his blanket, stood in one quick motion. His eyes sparkled. "This is the best part of the day," he said, looking at the still desert. "The air is like a cool drink. But when I think of how it will be when the sun climbs—"

"You'll know it today," Wescott cut in. "We'll have to share the burro's pack."

They ate hurriedly. Wescott prepared the packs, giving himself the heavier load. Once he straightened and looked with satisfaction at the copper-tinged clouds that moved sluggishly above the far mountains. There was body in the dawn wind, as if great pressure was being applied at some unseen point. And little by little the clouds gathered for the assault.

Jim took the lead. Wescott shouldered his pack and led the burro a dozen paces behind. The sun climbed the sky. Sand and rocks reflected heat. A shimmer lifted from the floor of the desert and the distant mountains changed color. At dawn they had presented a jagged wall, seemingly near. But as the day wore on they receded, changed color to a hazy yellow.

Lava and rock patches lay scattered all around. The sun beat down and sand

dragged at their feet. The burro staggered often. It was an effort to keep her moving.

At noon they halted, but neither man was hungry. Jim looked at the burro with pity. "Will she make it?"

As he spoke, the burro fell heavily.

"There's your answer," Wescott said.

A man did not kill that in which he had faith. Neither did he allow it to suffer. Wescott killed the burro with a single shot. Then he removed her small pack. "We'll leave half of our load here," he said.

Each man carried a canteen. Wescott fastened the canvas water bag to his belt. As they started on again, he looked at the sky and swore softly. The clouds had drifted from sight. The wind had died and there was no taste of dust in the hot air. The sandstorm he had hoped for had passed them by. The desert had failed him.

They walked steadily, Jim still in the lead. After an hour, they moved across a slight rise of shale and rough stones. Jim stepped around a ledge, reaching out with one hand to balance himself. It was then Wescott saw the glittering coils. His throat closed on a warning cry. But even as the dry rattle sounded, his hand darted for the gun, the shot broke sharply. Jim leaped to one side. A yard from where his hand had been, the snake uncoiled in death, its head smashed.

Wescott holstered his gun. He directed quick rage against himself. He said roughly, "Watch where you put your hands!"

Jim had turned pale beneath the stubble of his dark beard. "Close," he said. "Maybe you'd better take the lead."

Wescott's mouth twisted. "Afraid?"

"I don't hanker to die out here, if that's what you mean," Jim said curtly.

"You're used to having others clear your way, aren't you?"

Jim flushed scarlet. Anger narrowed his eyes. But there was something mixed with the hot anger—a frustrated uncertainty.

Wescott brushed past him with a contemptuous swing of his shoulders. He had insulted young Morgan in order to sharpen the edge of his own hatred. But the anger he had hoped for in return was not there, and his feelings had been dulled instead of sharpened. There was no satisfaction in going against a quitter.

In the late afternoon they followed a sandy bed around a shoulder of rock that ended in a tall chimney. Wescott stopped every so often to dig the heel of his boot through the hard crust of the wash. Beneath, the sand was a dry pack. Wescott smiled and looked ahead. Beyond the chimney, the floor of the desert lifted to a shale cliff that marked the beginning of barren foothills. It was here, at the bottom of a cup-shaped depression, below the cliff, that the spring had bubbled. And always a measure of seepage had moistened the ancient creek bed for a short distance. Now it was bone dry. The old prospector had not been wrong.

Wescott said, "Your canteen."

Jim frowned. "What's the idea?"

"We're going on water rations," Wescot said. "It's ninety miles to Hermosa." He held out his hand. "Your canteen."

Slowly, Jim unbuckled it from his belt, handed it over. Wescott shook it to judge its contents, then his own. With what water remained in the canvas bag, they would have a little less than a full canteen each.

He started back, then turned as Jim said, "We've been traveling all day. Seems to me we can rest—"

"And have the vultures pick your bones clean?" Wescott snapped. "We're starting back now, and we're only traveling during the nights. With luck we'll reach Hermosa in four days. Come on!"

THE sun slid swiftly toward the jagged peaks. For a moment it appeared to hesitate, as if reluctant to withdraw its heat from the deesrt. Then it flattened and

was gone, leaving behind a wall shot with flame. Little by little the sky darkened. A few stars flickered uncertainly, became bolder as the night wind rose. The wind swept the heat from the land. The silver moon hung low and shed its cold light—and where all had been golden with heat, now it was pale with the chill of the coming night.

The going was rough. Wescott set a steady pace, and more than once he heard Jim curse as he stumbled in the darkness.

"Stay close to me," Wescott called back. "If you get lost and can't reach me with your voice, sit tight and build a fire."

On some far ridge a coyote howled at the moon. The cry stirred Wescott to inward agony that lay close to physical pain. He thought of Francesca, her dark hair on the pillow, her soft lips parted in slumber. Of whom was she thinking tonight? He stumbled and cursed, aware that he had angled from his line of march. He looked at the stars and quickly corrected his heading.

The sun had cleared the horizon when he saw the vultures. A few planed down, but a dozen of the huge birds were feeding on the burro. They waddled clumsily away when the men approached.

Jim groaned with weariness and disgust. "Filthy birds!" he exclaimed. "Let's get out of here."

Jim's eyelids were red and swollen, his beard thick with dust, his mouth puffed and dry. Wescott knew his own appearance to be no different. He was suddenly conscious of thirst.

Packing the food they had left here, they continued the march. The sun lifted and a film of sweat broke out all over Wescott. He turned down an arroyo, deeper than the rest, and stopped where a clump of cactus and rock afforded a reasonable amount of shade.

"We'll spend the day here," he said.

"I could use a drink." Jim ran his tongue across his lips. He looked eagerly at the canteens.

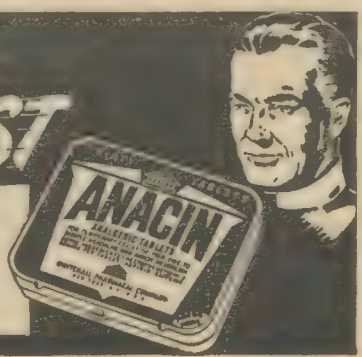
"You'll get one. After that, sleep."

For Wescott, sleep was filled with unreal images. Once he awoke to find the sun beating him. He shivered against a sudden chill, and a frown gathered about his eyes. He stood slowly and walked back and forth, lifting his legs high. A numbing ache had settled in his joints. He sat with his back against a boulder and closed his eyes. After a while he dozed.

They continued the march at sunset. Wescott found himself tiring quickly, but he continued at a dogged pace. Chills shook him again and again, punctuated by periods of hot fever. He mumbled as he walked, head forward, arms swinging loose at his side. He was grateful when the night lifted.

Heat came with the day, but there was no sun. Dark cloud masses covered it, and the wind came in sudden gusts. Wescott tasted dust, a heavy intangible dust that settled like a coating of slime on his tongue.

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST



Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.

He looked quickly around for shelter. But nothing offered protection from the coming storm. He hurried his pace as the wind increased and the dust thickened. Up ahead, in the stirring sand clouds, there was a mound covered by sagebrush, high as his shoulders. Its opposite side was scooped hollow, three or four holes burrowed down, a rabbit's lair, perhaps a coyote's. Jim dropped to the ground, his head between his knees.

"Dig," Wescott said hoarsely.

He dug with both hands to deepen the hollow. Jim spat, made a face, but helped in the digging.

The wind shrieked all around them, and the floor of the desert became alive. The wind dug at the sand, carried it away in great clouds. It dug at roots, loosened them, and brush tumbled and flew with the wind. The sand clouds thickened and darkened the sky. Both men knotted kerchiefs about their faces, but still the dust and the grit burned their eyes, entered their nostrils, coated their throats.

ALL DAY the storm continued and there was little light. The hollow, torn now by the wind, was their world. Wescott stirred from half sleep. He moved heavily, as if through a dream, feeling the sand that had drifted to cover his lower body. Opening his eyes, he experienced agony. He moistened the kerchief with his tongue, brushed the sand from his eyes. He finished to find Jim watching him.

"God, I could use a drink."

Wescott offered one of the canteens. "Three swallows."

Jim drank eagerly. Sighing, he handed the canteen back. Wescott drank. His throat felt swollen, and the water had a brackish taste. He shivered again.

Jim was watching him closely. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Don't talk," Wescott said. "Dry you out."

He rose up and looked out. The wind had died down a little, but the air was still heavy with dust. The floor of the desert had changed, as if a giant hand brushed it.

"Time to move," Wescott said.

He rose and took one of the ropes that bound his pack and tied it to the back of his belt. "This'll keep us together," he explained, fastening the other end around Jim's waist.

They started out. Wescott stumbled often, calling himself a fool for leading Jim around like a blind man. But if the desert was to be his weapon, he would not direct its aim. A racking cough shook him. He lowered his head and plowed forward, stopping now and again to look for stars. But not even the moon pierced the black night.

The next morning there was no wind and a dim red sun rose. Wescott was suddenly conscious that he had been walking without thought. His feet felt swollen, his legs ached, and each step was an effort. His knees caved, he fell on his face, rolled over, and something jerked at his waist. He sat up and blinked at young Morgan who stood, half reeling, at his side.

Jim's face was caked with dust. It powdered his brows and his beard. The creases in his clothing were filled with dust. Wescott looked into bloodshot eyes, looked for fear, defeat. The eyes smiled, the cracked and swollen mouth twisted into the semblance of a grin. There was something in the eyes Wescott had never noticed before.

They rested throughout the day. When night fell there was one canteen of water at Wescott's waist. They stumbled on through the cooler darkness.

Dawn came. Wescott, swaying, turned and saw Jim directly behind him.

He moved doggedly ahead. He tripped and fell twice during the first hour. Once Jim came to help him up. The other time was merely an awareness of falling, of getting up slowly, the past dead inside him, the future a dim void.

He knew reason was leaving him. Fever ran through him again and again, hitting

him with the force of a club. Then he would tremble so hard with icy chills that he could not control himself. All he came to see was yellow. The desert, the sky—all was a sheet of flaming yellow. He staggeerd and fell again.

He sat up, his breathing a hoarse croaking sound. He had a vague impression of someone taking the canteen from his belt, forcing his head back. Coolness melted between his lips. He pushed it away with both hands and got up.

He walked, and as he walked, he heard a voice raving in his ear, and he was aware that the voice was his own. And yet, floating in the grip of the fever, he could not stop it. Then all of a sudden his mind cleared. He staggered along in silence.

The sun was high and he knew he could go no farther. He sat down, looking at his legs stretched out in front of him, crying without tears, hating himself. Jim stumbled to his side. His grotesque mouth moved.

"How much farther."

"Ten, eleven miles."

Jim pressed the canteen in his hands. It was in Wescott to refuse, but his fingers tightened around it. He tilted the canteen. A few drops moistened his lips. The canteen was empty.

He flung it to one side, then gathered himself and lunged at Jim. They rolled in the sand, Wescott beating wildly with his fists, screaming:

"You finished the water! You want me to die out here so you and—"

Jim rolled away, climbed to his feet. "You don't know what—"

"I'll kill you—"

Wescott jerked the gun from its holster. And then a weight dropped inside of his mind. What was this? Was he the weakling? He offered the gun to young Morgan. "Kill me. I don't want the buzzards to tear out my living eyes. Kill me and go on alone."

Jim's answer came with an effort. "We can make ten miles."

"Kill me or I'll kill you!"

The newness was still in Jim's eyes. "You'll have to kill me to keep me from helping you."

Wescott opened his mouth to answer. And a weight hit him back of the eyes and he fell heavily.

HE AWOKE to sweet coolness on his forehead. He opened his eyes. A blurred face swayed and became clear. Francesca uttered a glad cry. Her eyes were wet.

She called. A man entered the room. Dave Morgan, a thick, graying man. He leaned over and looked at Wescott, then straightened and said, "Five days. You rapped at the gates, Ben."

Wescott grinned weakly. "Didn't figure they'd take me up there."

"Not for a long, long time," Francesca said and kissed him.

Wescott said, "Jim?"

There was pride in Dave Morgan's answer. "Don't know what happened to him, but when he walked in with you on his back he was a new man. Looked me in the eye and told me he wanted to go to work. Then he dropped down like a dead man." Dave Morgan chuckled. "Was up and around again the next day. You'll be seeing him, Ben."

Wescott looked at his wife. "I was wrong in my thoughts," he said softly.

She dropped to her knees, her head on his chest. He could smell the sweetness of her. He stroked her shoulder as she sobbed, and his own eyes misted. In Wescott's weakness, Jim had found strength. But Jim had not been the only one to learn a lesson. Wescott's faith in others, shaky at best, had been restored.

He kissed his wife's hair. "All right," he whispered. "Everything is all right now. . . ."

The daintiest belle in the Dry Gulch diggin's would go to the sucker who won the . . .

CHEATERS' DUEL

By GENE L. HENDERSON

"I ought to call the sheriff and have him haul you away," he yells at me.

YOU'D THINK that out here where the elements are mostly against people a good part of the time, that the least a feller could do would be to deal fair with his fellow man. But there's always some skunk that doesn't figure the same and I reckon that's as good a name as any to call Shorty Pearson. He is simply a man what can not be trusted, which I later found to my sorrow.

People don't seem to mind his ways so much and maybe that's because he has

such a smooth line, especially with the women. Where I usually say something intelligent and to the point, Shorty can deviate from the truth and make it sound better. Even when it comes to looks, he was left outside, what with a broken nose shoved to one side when a wild hoss kicked him. Some folks might say I was prejudiced just because my manly features is about as perfect as they could be made, but it ain't so. I guess I could overlook most of that but it's his conceit that really gets me down. There again I reckon the contrast is most irritating, me being so modest and unassuming alongside that braggart. Especially when I am so much better than him in almost everything.

Proof that no one can trust him can be had in the case of Belle. Now Belle was a fine, upstanding girl what worked in the one and only café in Dry Gulch. Not only that, but it was sort of understood that she was to marry Steve Peaden whenever he can save up enough dinero. For that purpose he hired on with the Bar-A outfit and had left with a trail herd for the railroad, about ten days travel each way.

Shorty being the sort of coyote that he is, I can predict his actions, so when word comes that Belle will be alone for the next three weeks, I rush over to the café. Shore enough, that dog of a Shorty is over there trying to date her for the next dance over at the schoolhouse. Only my timely appearance and like offer keeps him from succeeding and Belle said that she would think it over.

There being nothing else to do, Shorty and I both decided to eat then and there, it also being a good way to keep an eye on one another.

THE MEAL dragged on and on since a double-dealer like Shorty always suspects someone else of the worst. In this case he is afraid that my quiet dignity will win the day if he is not there to keep Belle from accepting me as I know she would like to do. And I was not about to let him out of my sight either, as he is always capable of telling any kind of lie.

Finally he could stand it no longer and got up. He knew I hadn't been paid for some time so the dirty dog slipped a shiny silver dollar under his plate as a tip for Belle. Naturally that would not be fair to me so, for that reason alone, I slyly slipped it into my pocket when I got up to pay Belle's boss at the counter. That-away she wouldn't think me a skinflint for not leaving a tip; she would think of us both that way.

My bill only bein' ninety cents, I felt it poetic justice or something to pay with the dollar that Shorty had donated to the cause. I tossed it on the counter while Shorty was talking to Belle and the same sound I detected was also heard by her boss. He scowled suspiciously, picked up the cartwheel and dropped it again. Deader'n the desert in mid-summer.

There is a sound like a wounded steer and he bellered, "What goes on here, you broken-down cowpoke? Trying to pass off a bum dollar on me? I oughter call the sheriff right now and have him haul you away." For once in my life I could talk fast and finally pacified the old goat with good money. The only bad part is that Belle said she wanted more time to make up her mind and would go riding with Shorty right at the present.

The big dance was gettin' closer and still Belle couldn't seem to make up her mind if she wanted to enjoy herself or if she was going with Shorty.

One day at the saloon—er, I mean Pop's Dry Goods, of course—the fellers were all talking about the good pistol shots of the days gone by. Naturally Shorty had a story to tell about how good he is and one thing led to another until we were arguing which of us was the better shot.

The boys are all for a match, of course, and that, plus our rivalry for Belle's attentions, makes us all fer it too. The match

was set for the following day so that we can get in a little practice. The sheriff was to be judge, which is fair enough.

Belle was all excited when she heard what was to take place and her boss said she could quit work long enough to watch. It was such a natural that she said the one which won would take her to the dance.

The next afternoon, we all gathered right outside of town where the sheriff had rigged up two stands and had some paper nailed to each one, with circles drawn on them. Each circle counts so many points if we drill it and, accordin' to the rules that the sheriff sets down, we'd fire at the same time but only five shots a time. Thataway he could count the score each time and patch the paper before it got all torn and shot up. Also, if either of us slipped in an extra shot and had six holes any one time, then the other gent would win the match. Shorty and I both agreed.

We were both to fire twenty slugs, five at a time, and the first five found Shorty and I equal. Then the second five I got a little careless and he scored four more points than me. Everyone was getting excited, including him and me, and on the third five, I scored three more than him, now bein' only one behind. We personally inspected our targets to see which way the slugs was drifting and to patch up the holes. I was about to accidentally punch a hole in my bullseye with a stick when I saw the sheriff staring at me and so desisted. I watched Shorty since he is cheat enough to do the same thing.

WE WALKED back towards the line to fire the last five when suddenly, like a wild stampede, a brilliant thought struck me. I almost choked in my excitement but recovered and made ready to spring the master trick of my career. According to the rules what was laid down, any target with more than five holes in it automatically disqualified that man. Then what could be better than for me to trigger my five off sorta fast and fire an extra one at Shorty's target? What with him and me both firing, no one was likely to notice the sound of an extra slug.

Everyone was tense and when the sheriff bellers "Fire!" they all jumped as if we had been firing at them. I triggered off three and, seein' out of the corner of my eye that everyone including the sheriff was straining to see the holes in the targets, quickly sent one over at Shorty's target and then pushed two more into mine. It had all been done sorta fast, of course, so my score would probably not be too good but, with Shorty disqualified for his five and my extra on his target, who cared?

I hung back when the others rushed up to the targets, the better to enjoy my sweet triumph over Shorty. He stopped short of his target and the most amazed and incredulous look I have ever seen spread over his ugly face.

Everyone was looking at me sorta strange and I come to suddenly, hearing the sheriff call out my name. "Eh?" I asked.

He spoke regretful, "I said that it was too bad you didn't count right and fired too many times at your target. I thought you was putting them out a mite bit fast so I reckon you must've gotten mixed up. You're disqualified, son."

I stared at my target. Sure enough, there was six holes in it. "But," I protested, "There must be some mistake, Sheriff, I only fired five times."

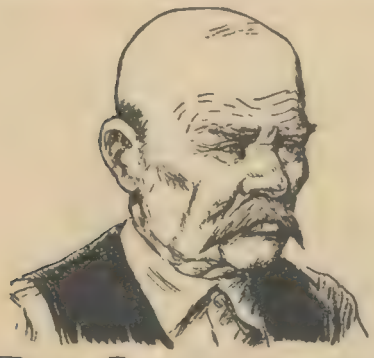
"Then there would only be four holes in Shorty's target if it was one of his," he replied and turns to count it. We all look and, even counting the slug I put into his, there is only five holes.

A slow smile was beginning to spread over Shorty's face and it was all I could do to keep from blowing up. That dirty, lowdown yaller coyote had put an extra slug into my target!

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by **ROBBINS AND WAGGENER**



BEN LITTLEFIELD

1. Ben Littlefield never made the history books as one of his country's greats. But to the people of Westbury, Montana, Ben will always rank as one of the best and bravest. Old Ben ran the Littlefield Eat Place. He was short, near-sighted and bald, but he could turn out some of the West's finest flapjacks. His greatest pleasure was watching a delighted patron tackle a plate of food.

2. Times were peaceful in Westbury and Ben's diners grew fatter and fatter with his fine food. But on March 11, 1879, the Westbury First National Bank was robbed by a gang of five masked men. Lewis and Sam Cooley, the owners of the bank, were shot in the back. Hiram Meyer, the teller, was badly gunwhipped and near death. Clearly, the masked men were not ordinary outlaws but blood-maddened killers, and a posse was hastily formed to track them down.

3. Ben didn't join the posse. He had never learned how to ride a horse or fire a gun. Cooking took a lot of time, the way Ben did it. But he decided to do his part and kept his restaurant open very late that night to provide hot food for the returning posse. Then he heard approaching horses and a hoarse voice cry, "How about some grub?" This late-eating party wasn't the posse, he soon learned, but the five hungry killers. They kept their guns pointed at Ben as he was ordered to cook.

4. Ben had always prided himself on his skill but this time he outdid himself. The famished gunslicks ate like wolves at a slaughter and asked for more. But in the middle of the second serving the five rolled out of their chairs and sank to the ground. When the posse returned, Ben turned over five very sick outlaws. He had flavored the food with ground lead.

BOOTHILL WELCOME

CHAPTER ONE

Pardners

BLUE STEELE awoke instantly, after the manner of his wild kind. His hand jerked to the ivory handle of a Colt, under the blanket. Motionless then, sharply alert, he listened tensely.

He had not consciously heard anything. Nor had he been expecting any trouble out here, as the fact that he had left the camp-

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As though from far away, Blue heard the Kid's cry: "Slim! Damn you, I'm takin' you!"

The owlhoot waited for men like that—Blue Steele and the Kid—but first they had another trail to ride, back to the men who'd promised the Kid a hot-lead welcome . . . and were now anxiously waiting to oblige!

Thrilling Novelette of Partners Back to Back

By FOSTER-HARRIS

fire burning testified. Yet deep in his brain instinct had signaled danger. There was something menacing out there in the night.

Blue himself lay in the shadow. Leaving that fire burning had been a concession to the Kid, who huddled beside it, still asleep. Thin and pitifully ragged, the Kid had needed that warmth. Gamely, he hadn't complained. But even at sundown, his teeth had chattered.

Steele flicked a glance at him now, softening. He liked this freckled-faced youngster, despite himself. In the two weeks that the Kid had been trailing at his heels, Blue realized he had become plumb attached to the little feller. Each day he had meant to tell him here was where they must part. Yet each day, somehow, he had put it off.

He didn't quite understand why, even now. Maybe it was because the Kid had been so much like a lost pup, pathetically eager to take up with the man who had given him perhaps the first kind word he had known in months. That was the way it had been. The Kid, really, had just insisted on adopting Blue.

Thus far it hadn't turned out so badly, Blue had to admit. The Kid hadn't been any trouble. On the contrary, he'd proved himself darn useful. And it might very well be true that he was on the dodge, as he hinted. Remembering his own grim youth, Blue could believe it.

Now, straining his ears, he really did hear something out there in the blackness. It was only a ghost of movement, apparently horses, but not their own cautiously close-picketed mounts, he was sure. He started to hiss a warning to the Kid, but the youngster already was aroused, snaking swiftly out of that firelight. Immediately from the dark came a sharp hail.

"Hello there at the fire! We're comin' in on you!"

Blue Steele twisted to his knees in one lithe movement. "Better speak your piece first. Or you might stop lead. Who are you?"

Out of the corner of his eye he noted how completely the Kid had faded into the shadow. That button was not so dumb.

The sharp voice lifted again. "Couple o' pilgrims. Don't shoot, feller. We ain't hostile, noways."

The clatter of hoofs came to Blue as two ponies stumbled wearily over the rocks toward the camp. As they drew closer, the Kid darted quickly out of the gloom to stir the blaze. He faded back. Again Blue's eyes registered approval.

NOT exactly violets were the two hombres who drew up and dismounted in that strengthened, flickering firelight. Their faces were heavy, dark. Both of them were packing two sixguns, swung low. Scabbarded Winchesters hung on their saddles. The taller of the two had a smear of blackened blood across one cheek. The other man was carrying a stout sack, slung over his left shoulder by a length or rope. It seemed heavy. And the way he coddled it hinted also that its contents were valuable.

Face graven, appraising, Blue stepped slowly toward them. Save for his hat and spurs, he was fully dressed. His thumbs were hooked into the broad belts supporting his own brace of ivory-handled cutters. "Well?" he asked, very softly.

The tall stranger turned, his gaze seeking out the Kid, still in the shadows. With a little contemptuous shrug, he continued to turn, reaching for the cinches of his sagging horse. The shorter, heavier man spoke in a quick rasp.

"Amigos, I see you got your broncs staked out right handy. Well, ours are dead beat. And we got pressin' business yonderly. We'll trade you, our's fer yours and mebbe even throw in a little cash to boot. What you say?"

Blue yawned sleepily. These jiggers were probably outlaws, killers on the getaway from something, almost beyond doubt. But Blue didn't even seem interested.

Blue yawned again. "You willin' to

guarantee your horses ain't stole, too?" he asked, so casually that for a moment nobody got it. But then that *too* soaked in, and the short man stiffened with an angry grin.

"You see," explained Blue sweetly, "once I damn near got hung. Just because o' the horse a feller traded me, sudden like, thisaway. And besides, that's a pretty good gruya I got now. It would have to be worth my while, afore I'd care to part with him."

"We'll make it plenty worth your while," rapped out the short man. Twisting, he addressed his partner. "Slim, can we stand as much as fifty apiece to these gents? If they'll trade prompt?"

"That's a lot o' money," grumbled the tall man. "But, okay." He turned to Blue Steele. "You see, gents, we're in one hell of a hurry. Tryin' to ketch some fellers. We'll guarantee these horses ain't stole."

The short man was fumbling inside his coat. Now he brought his hand out, with exaggerated slowness as he caught Blue's cold stare. Firelight caught the sheen of something yellow filling that hand. The short man's voice was soothingly persuasive.

"We'll pay off in gold, too, gents. Safest money on earth to have in your jeans. Fifty apiece."

As though by accident, a double eagle spilled out of his paw, went spinning down. Like a flickering shadow, the squat stranger flung himself sideways, free hand plugging for his gun.

Blue grinned coldly. Automatically, faster even than thought, his own hands were blurring down to meet and overmatch that draw. He hadn't been tricked by the bright, distracting glitter of that falling coin. But they were two to one and both fast. Likely, he sensed, they'd get him.

The short gunman wouldn't. It would be the tall jigger who did the killing. The tall gunman, just a tiny edge ahead, had started his reach exactly with the drop of that coin, not afterward.

As though from far away, Blue heard the Kid's cry: "Slim! Damn you, I'm takin' you!"

For one brief tick of time, the tall gunman hesitated. Contemptuously, he had not taken the boy into account at all. Now he realized his error. Watching like a hawk, the Kid had drawn right with him and almost as fast.

Perhaps the tall gunner still could have made good his edge and tallied at least one of the two. But his hesitancy was fatal. Before he could make up his mind which one to shoot first, both Blue and the Kid had completed their draws.

There was no waver in Blue's machine-like deadliness. His was the first shot. Pointblank, he drove it into the squat killer's snarling face, knocking him kicking. His long .45's swung.

Desperately, sensing his doom now, the

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tall gunman turned loose his first slug at Blue. It was wide—and just a shade too late anyway.

By that time the tall man already was dying, with a bullet in his heart and still another smashing through his belly.

Convulsively, his Colt exploded again as he sagged down. The lead splashed into the fire. The licking gunflame of the excited Kid tore at him a final time. Then it was still. The short gunman lay as he had fallen, not even twitching now. His sack had partly spilled its contents. The fire-glow winked on yellow gold, garnished with the green of bills.

SOMEWHERE far off in the night a coyote howled. Slowly, Blue Steele jacked out empties, reached for fresh shells. The smile he gave the staring Kid, beyond the fire, was a little gray.

"Tried to pay off in lead, button," he muttered hoarsely. "Cute. But not quite cute enough."

The Kid crept closer to the fire. He was shaking badly. He tried to grin, but his eyes remained wide, staring. "I killed him, Blue," he said dazedly. "I killed him. But I had to. He asked fer it."

"Yeah." Blue's voice was soft. Understandingly, he reached a big hand to the boy's shoulder. "He had it comin' to him —pardner."

Startled, the Kid twisted about. Even in his distress he couldn't miss the emphasis on that last word. His eyes were suddenly hungry, eager. Twice he choked before he could speak.

"That's—that's the first time you ever called me that, Blue. *Pardner.* You—you mean it?"

"Meanin' nothin' less." Blue's grin was affectionate.

He stooped quickly, stripping off the squat outlaw's short, blanket-lined coat. "Here, put this on," he commanded the shivering boy. "You're freezin'. And he won't be needin' it any more."

Ignoring the Kid's feeble protest, he bundled him into the warm garment. "Now let's see what else these hasty horse traders were packin'. Hmm, looks like they had money too, don't it?"

He knelt, gathering up the scattered coins and returning them to the sack. "Boy, and plenty!" he remarked. "Now where do you suppose they got it? Robbed a bank?"

"There's a bank over at Escarbada," the Kid said. "Bland Conroy's." He started to say more, but stopped.

Blue had picked up a flat packet of currency and was staring at it thoughtfully. "Fresh bills, Kid," he said. "Yeah, seems likely. They must've either robbed that bank, or anyway, some bank."

He straightened, dropping the notes into the sack. "Now what we gonna do, Blue?" asked the Kid nervously. "Stay here? Or fog it?"

A twisted grin on his brown face, Blue turned, staring out into the darkness. "Why, if these here hellions really were hurryin' to catch somebody, we could just stay," he drawled. "But since I sorta suspect it was the other way 'round—a posse after them, mebbe—" His chuckle was dry. "Me, I vote to fog it. Somehow I never was much good at explainin' to sheriffs."

He was already moving as he spoke, scattering the fire with his toe. Questioningly, he held up the sack.

"Stolen money, I reckon, Kid. Mebbe bloody as well. Do we take it? Or leave it for the posse?"

"We're takin' that money, Blue," said the Kid suddenly, fiercely. "I'm no thief. But if that's really from Bland Conroy's bank, I've mebbe got reasons to keep it."

In the dying light, Blue could see how tightly the boy's mouth closed as he broke off. "Yeah?" he said, very softly. "Okay, Kid."

He asked no questions. If or when the Kid wanted to reveal those reasons, all right. But until then Blue respected his

reticence. He had his own secrets that never passed his lips.

"Better refuel your gun before we ride, button," he reminded quietly. "Might need it. I'll git the horses."

Two minutes later they were melting into the night. Clinging to the money sack, the Kid was oddly silent. Only once did he speak. And then it was in a queer, hesitant whisper, as though he wished to reassure himself.

"Pardners, Blue?"

"Pardners, Kid," promised Blue. "Till hell freezes."

CHAPTER TWO

The Gunsmoke Pest

AT DAWN they were halted in brushy cover at the mouth of a canyon. Behind them the rising sun was reddening the tops of the high peaks and ridges. In front was a wide basin, still shrouded in mysterious, blue-gray shadows.

Squatting on his lean haunches, Blue rolled a cigarette. As always, his eyes roved in their eternal watchfulness. But he was relaxed, easy. Thoughtfully, he considered the scene before him, then nodded.

"Nice-looking' country, Kid. Know anything about it?"

The Kid's tired face twisted in a thin, bitter smile. "I ought to, Blue," he said, very quietly. "It use to be my home."

From under squinting lids, Steele gave him an interested glance. But his next question was not the one he really wanted to ask. "Know any place close, then, do you, where we could get a bait o' breakfast?"

"The Box K's yonder behind that swell." The Kid pointed. "That motte o' trees, see? They'd feed us. But I don't know . . ."

He hesitated, frowning down at the sack beside him. Flicking his cigarette, Blue spoke casually.

"Kid, as long as you ain't got no definite ideas yet what you intend doin' with that money, I'd say cache it somewheres. Ain't exactly the safest thing on earth to be packin' around."

His gaze went mildly over the Kid's ragged clothing. "Though it prob'ly wouldn't be no crime to spend some of them pesos on clothes," he added. "No matter whose money it is.

"That coat might get by. It's common enough, I reckon, not to be recognized. But the rest of your outfit . . ."

The boy nodded. "I sure could use some clothes. All right," he agreed wistfully. Then his mouth tightened. "But I ain't plumb sure I want to steal this money, Blue. Not even if it is Bland Conroy's. I was jest thinkin', mebbe . . ."

He broke off, staring out across the valley with troubled eyes. After a moment, Blue coughed. "Don't need to tell me a thing, pardner," he said gently. "Not unless you want to. But if I can help . . ."

"I haven't much I can tell you, Blue," said the Kid and then lifted his eyes in quick apology. "That is, I—I mean I ain't got no real plans." His young face was suddenly old, shrunken. Bitter shadows came into his staring eyes, and his voice was hard.

"But if it's Conroy's money—Conroy, you see, was the man who ruined my dad. Then had him killed. Claimed he was a damn rustler."

Blue's mouth formed a silent *O*. Presently the Kid went on.

It wasn't a particularly novel story. Down there in the broad valley, Bland Conroy, banker, range hog, had run up against a flourishing partnership and had used the old strategy of dividing to destroy.

The Randlett & Thompson spread, said the Kid, hadn't been very big. But it had been a good one. They held lots of water and grass that was well worth stealing. Jack Randlett, his dad, hadn't cottoned to the ingratiating overtures of Conroy, and likely the banker-rancher hadn't wanted

him to. But old Joe Thompson and Conroy had become mighty thick.

So, first thing, Randlett & Thompson had split. Jack Randlett had taken the west half of the spread, Thompson the east, including the ranch house down there, now the Box K.

Then, still staying friendly with the Thompsons, Bland Conroy had set in to eat Jack Randlett and his boy up. He'd done it so cleverly that there was nothing much anyone could pin right on him. The rustlers who had run off Randlett's JR cows had all been plumb strangers, of course. Another man had bought up and foreclosed Randlett's mortgage, later just "happening" to sell to Conroy. Things went on like that until, at the end, Conroy's big Bar C had swallowed just about all Randlett had.

Of course Randlett hadn't taken it lying down. He'd fought desperately to defend himself. It had gotten him a bullet through the brain, with a suspiciously pat tale by Bar C gunmen of how they had caught him red-handed, changing the brand on a Conroy cow.

THE KID'S fists clenched as he told the story. "A dirty lie, Blue. My dad never did anything dishonest in his life. They gulched him; killed him first and then fixed up that brandin' fire and all. They never gave him a chance—the bullet that killed him was fired from behind!"

"And this ex-pardner of your dad's, this Thompson? He stood for that?" demanded Blue incredulously.

"Well, he did ride over and tell me I better come live with him. He'd look after me. I told him to go to hell."

"And then?"

"Conroy was sayin' I'd helped my dad an' oughta be sent to reform school and all that. So I got Dad's old gun and took a shot at Conroy, then lit out fer the tall timber. I hought I'd killed him." The Kid flushed, shamefacedly. "Found out later, thought, I hadn't. But since then I been on the dodge. Two years."

"How old are you now, Kid?"

The Kid hesitated. Then, defiantly, his eyes met Blue's gaze. "Seventeen. But don't take me fer no baby. I'm growed."

"I'm not sayin' you ain't, feller," assented Blue.

Abstractedly, he plucked at a blade of grass. "So last night when you found out this was probably Conroy money, why naturally you started ponderin' about it. To keep it. Or what?"

The Kid nodded. "He stole as much and a lot more from my dad. Then murdered him. Only I . . ."

Blue squinted as the youngster hesitated. "Well, if it is his money, simplest thing would be just to keep it and spend it," he mused. "But since you don't know yet for sure—why, I still say, cache it. If you get caught with that on you, why it might be all Conroy's good luck."

"You're right," the Kid agreed. Opening the sack, he counted the money hurriedly. There was a little better than fifty-two hundred dollars.

They rode a short way back into the canyon. Clambering up a rocky slope, the Kid pushed the sack into a crevice, covered it carefully, then slid down to where Steele waited. "That looks safe enough," Blue approved. "Don't reckon any posse will be trailin' us this far. But, even if they did, they'd not spot that."

He spat out the blade of grass he had been chewing. "Now, le's go see if we can get some grub."

The Kid clambered obediently into his saddle. "If there's no other place handy, we'll circle and ride on this Box K," proposed Blue. "That is, if you don't object too violent. Me, from what you told me, I'm right interested in talkin' some with this Thompson guy."

A troubled expression shadowed the Kid's face. "Blue, I—I wasn't really meanin' to rope you in on my troubles," he

stammered. "Hell, I guess you got—"

Blue chuckled understandingly. "That's what you get when you take on a sidekick, button. He'll horn in. Just like you did on me last night, when I was gettin' myself nicely killed. Come on."

THE PLACE seemed oddly quiet as they rode up. Woodsmoke curled in a thin, blue coil from the cook-shack chimney. But there were no horses waiting outside, and no one was anywhere in sight, no punchers about the corrals or sheds. Blue's eyes narrowed.

A fat man had come to the cook-shack door, wiping his hands on a flour-sack apron. "Howdy, gents," he greeted. Then, with dropped jaw, he stared; finally came hobbling as fast as he could come.

"Well, if it ain't young Randlett!" The old fellow's face was alight with surprise and pleasure. "Why, Bud, I'm tickled to death! Where've you been? Joe's sought everywhere for you!"

He was pumping the Kid's hand, patting him delightedly on the back. The Kid was grinning.

"You ain't changed a bit, Pancake," the Kid laughed. "Say, I want you to meet"—he hesitated, glancing in quick question at Blue, who nodded— "meet Blue Steele, my pardner. This is Pancake Carter, Blue. Worst grub spoiler unhung."

Pancake gave Blue a once-over, shaking hands. "I've heard of you," he admitted. Then, quickly, "I take it you ain't et?"

"You take it correct," grinned Blue.

"Well, then, come in, come in!" the old cook urged hospitably.

He ushered them in, piling their plates high.

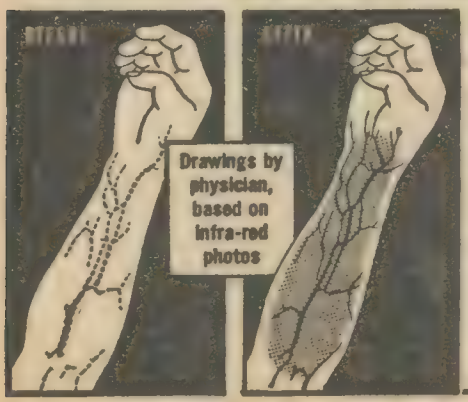
"Say, where is everybody, anyways, Pancake?" inquired the Kid.

The old man turned, his grizzled face suddenly somber. "You ain't heard? Why, Joe got shot late yesterday, over to Escarbada. They said he was dyin'. Miz Thompson and Ann and the boys went in last night, quick as they heerd. Rest o' the hands are out tryin' to help ketch the damn bank robbers that done it.

"Don't know as I got the real straight of it myself." Pancake shook his head. "It was kinda hectic around here last night, you see, and ain't nobody been back since. But from what I gathered, Joe was jest startin' home when these two strange hombres jumped him. Jest outside o' town. Shot him dead.

"Then these same two hellions, a tall one and a chunkier one, hit right on into town, caught Bland Conroy still in the bank and stuck him up. Took everything loose, slugged him and high-tailed. Got five-six thousand dollars, I hear."

Wooden-faced, Blue cast the Kid a quick, warning glance. "You say these jiggers jumped Thompson first?" he demanded. "And then rode in and robbed the bank? Seems sorta peculiar, don't it?"



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"Seems doggone funny," nodded Pancake. "If that's right. If they was bank robbers, why would they be messin' with one lone cowman?" He frowned wonderingly. "'Course it might be that Joe recognized 'em or somethin'," he hazarded. "They sure wasn't tryin' to rob him. Why, hell, everybody knows Joe's practically broke."

WITH a wry grimace, Pancake glanced at the Kid. "Last year or so Joe Thompson's shore been learnin' that what your dad said about Conroy was gospel, Bud," he said soberly. "With Jack Randlett gone, Conroy's been eatin' on Box K. He'll have it swallered, too, if somethin' don't happen mighty soon."

"Conroy's got all our place now, has he?" asked the Kid bitterly.

"Why, no." Pancake shook his head vigorously. "He ain't. That's one big thing him and Joe are at outs about. Joe's been keepin' up the taxes on your home place. Holdin' it fer you, lookin' after your interest best he could. He's even been runnin' your JR brand with his own and you got a right nice little bunch waitin' fer you."

The Kid blinked incredulously. Before he could speak, the old cook hurried on. There was an embarrassed smile on his face and his voice was gruffly wistful.

"I know you don't think much o' Joe, Bud. But he's really been tryin' to make amends. He's stubborn and he wouldn't fer the world admit your dad was dead right and he was wrong. But he knows it. He's fought fer your interests while you been away jest like you was his own boy. And—now that he's mebbe dyin' . . ." Pancake gestured awkwardly. "Why, perhaps you'd be willin' to let bygones be bygones and go see him. He's at Bill Eskridge's."

For a long moment the Kid did not answer. His thin, freckled face stared broodingly into space. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Yeah, Pancake. I'll go." He twisted questioningly toward Blue. "You go with me, Blue?" he asked hesitantly.

Methodically, Blue chewed and swallowed before answering. "Why, yeah, Kid," he nodded. "You want me, I'll go. Don't reckon any lawmen in these parts are lookin' for me, especial." He gulped down his coffee. "Ain't none of my business, Carter," he drawled. "But if you care to, will you tell me why Thompson was in town yesterday? Was it to see Conroy?"

"Why, yeah." Pancake blinked curiously. "To git his mail, and to see Conroy about that note Conroy's got."

"Conroy's got a note of Thompson's, has he?"

"A note fer forty-five hundred." The old cook's face darkened. "And it's due. Joe ain't got the money, neither, though he was hopin' he could git it. But now . . ." Pancake sighed. "Now I don't know what Miz Thompson and the boys will do, if Joe dies. They can't raise no such sum."

"And if that note ain't met?" asked Steele, very softly.

"If it ain't," said Carter, "why I reckon Bland Conroy will do jest what he aims. Git a judgment and take another bite off'n Box K. A bite so damn big they won't be anythin' left."

"If Thompson's really bad off, we better be travelin', Blue," urged the Kid, from the doorway.

"One other thing, Carter," Steele said. "When them two hairpins robbed the bank, was they masked?"

"They was slick-faced," informed Carter promptly. "I remember that. The marshal was shore he'd seen 'em in town before. Why?"

"Just curious." Blue was striding after the impatient Kid. "Thanks for the grub."

THEY rode swiftly away, the Kid leading. Not until a low swell had hidden the ranch house from sight did he break his silence. Then he turned a grim, puzzled face.

"Those were our two gunners, Blue," he breathed. "Robbed the bank, but shot Joe first. What do you make of that?"

"Don't know, Kid." Blue shook his head. "Have to wait and learn more. I am glad, though, you got shed o' that money. And mebbe you better strip off that coat, too. Might be somebody—"

He broke off, pointing. "Say, there's a JR cow—and calf."

The Kid's eyes noted the brand on the little animal's side. "Does look like Thompson's been takin' care of my stuff, don't it?" he admitted.

"If what Pancake told you is true, looks like he's been doin' his best to make amends," drawled Blue quietly. "Can't hardly ask a man to do more, button." He twisted in his saddle. "Say, how many children have the Thompsons got?"

"Two boys and a girl," the Kid informed. "Frank, he's the oldest, twenty-one. Young Joe, he's nineteen. And Ann, she's just six months younger than I am." Smiling softly, he looked away. "Pretty as a picture, too," he murmured.

Blue chuckled.

They were dipping down now toward a clear stream, fringed with cottonwoods and willows. "Rincon Creek," the Kid said. "And this here is land my dad homesteaded."

Appreciatively, Blue nodded. "She's a sweet layout, feller," he breathed. "Water, grass. No wonder this Conroy—" With a jerk he broke off, his gnarled hand twitching instinctively toward a gun. "Look over there, boy," he snapped.

Four horsemen had burst out of the willows and were spurring toward them. The Kid gave a gasp.

"It—it's Bland Conroy," he stammered. "Conroy and three of his Bar C hellions."

"Set still, Kid." Blue's voice was low, hard. "If the guy in front's the one you're callin' Conroy, that ain't the name I know him under. Set tight."

His edged glance flickered toward the boy's hand, clawed above his .44. "They're four to two, so don't start nothin' unless they do. But if you have to take another shot at him, pardner, make it count."

CHAPTER THREE

Hang, Rattle and Ride!

THEY were lean, swart men, the three who fanned out behind the banker-cowman. Blue didn't need to look at the Colts at their thighs or the scabbarded Winchesters to tell that they were gunfighters.

Conroy was different. He was heavy-set, pink-faced, smooth. He looked like a banker, all right, but not at all like the crooked, gunslick gambler he had been once.

"Well, well," Blue murmured. "If it ain't Faro Smith!"

Conroy's lips tightened angrily as Blue called that discarded name. But he ignored Blue and addressed the Kid.

"Back, are you, Randlett? And herding with an outlaw now?"

"Bumpin' into one, anyways," snapped the Kid, glaring. "What you doin' on my land?"

"Your land, is it?" Conroy laughed unpleasantly. "Ain't seen you around much of late, holding it down. Where you been?"

From under heavy, half-lowered lids, he was studying the boy as he spoke and looking particularly at that coat.

"None of your business where I been," the Kid said angrily. "And if that's all you got to ask, we'll be shovin' on."

"Just a minute," purred Conroy. "I've got more to ask. Plenty. And you better answer straight."

He paused, glancing quickly around at his men. He was not at all worried about the Kid. But this Steele hellion was different.

"Maybe you ain't heard," he said. "But the bank was stuck up, late yesterday. The skunks that did it shot down my friend Joe Thompson. Shot him fatally, I hear. We

been out nearly all night, lookin' for those killers. A tall one and a squatty one, riding bay horses. Just wondered if you happened to see 'em anywhere."

He paused again, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. He seemed languid, tired. But, under their drooping lids, Blue noted that his pale eyes were watching the Kid like a hawk. His next question came in a savage slash.

"What'd you do with that stuff you took off Ben and Slim last night? Answer me, Randlett, you damn snake!"

Perhaps the Kid's face betrayed him. Blue couldn't spare a glance to see. Deadly tense, he was watching Conroy. He saw a black glitter lick across those eyes and realized incredulously that the ex-gambler was blood mad. Swiftly, coldly, he cut in.

"I could ask what the hell you're talkin' about, Faro, but instead I'll just remark—any one of you four start to reach, and I'm killin' your boss first."

It was said so casually Blue might have been talking of the weather. But it made a believer of Conroy, nevertheless. He jerked a staying glance at his men.

"If you think you can get away with bank robbery, Steele, you and this snivelin' kid here—"

"You'll play heck, provin' we had anything to do with robbin' your bank," Blue interrupted coldly. "That is, if it really was robbed."

His eyes narrowed to insinuating slits. "Curious, ain't it? That you'd be doin' your bandit huntin' without a sheriff along. Yeah and even more curious that you should know those bandits by name—when from what you told in town, they were strangers."

It was a shot in the dark. But it all but set off the fireworks then and there. For an instant Blue thought Conroy was going to take his chance, stab for his gun regardless.

But then Bland Conroy relaxed. With a barking laugh, he shrugged, started to lift his hand in what looked like merely an irritated gesture. Then he let it fall.

Maybe it was meaningless. Or it might have been the beginning of some signal. Blue never learned. For immediately there came a diversion.

Over to his right, the Kid's pony reared suddenly. And when he came down, the boy's long .44 was out and leveled across his saddle horn. With Conroy glaring at Blue and his three men straining to divide their attention between the two, none had been paying the Kid much mind. Now his cry caught them wholly unbraced.

"All right, you fellers. Set still. Or I'll sure take pay fer what you did to my dad!"

They hung in their saddles, gaping. With their dropped jaws, awkward, frozen attitudes, they looked a little foolish, rather than deadly. But Blue could sense the fury flaring in the ex-gambler's brain. Hurriedly, he cut in again.

"What I said about you first, still goes, Faro. But we don't want to kill you. Now, fog it! And first one of you tries to whirl on us gets a button-hole right where his suspenders cross!"

THEY didn't tarry. As they loped back toward the creek again, Blue gave the Kid a crooked grin.

"Sorta tight, Kid," he breathed. "But we're gettin' good on this whipsaw stuff, ain't we? Come on."

They pounded away. Almost immediately, from down by the creek, Winchesters opened on them. A bullet whined over. Another splashed into the dust. But their flying start already had carried the two partners nearly beyond effective carbine range. Before the marksmen could target them, they were clear out of reach.

But a moment later, the three hired fighters came out of the bushes, galloping in pursuit. They held their Winchesters ready. When Steele unlimbered his own .44-70 and fired at them, they shot back. But they did not appear to be trying to close.

"Don't notice Conroy with 'em!" the

Kid snapped contemptuously. He now squirmed in his saddle. "Blue, why didn't you make those jiggers shed them guns while we had 'em covered?"

"I didn't dare," Blue admitted frankly. "Couldn't you see Faro Smith's eyes? One more flicker and he'd 've cut loose, covered or not! And four to two, they'd likely 've got us."

He squinted coldly back at their pursuers. "That guy was scared, button," he grunted. "Scared killer-crazy. I wonder why."

He pounded along a moment in silence. Then he said, "Kid, I'll bet the answer is that those bandits, originally, were Conroy's hired killers. He hired 'em to kill Joe Thompson. They bungled the job. Then came right back, robbed Conroy and fogged it. Don't it sound likely? No wonder he'd be scared. If those jaspers were caught, they'd squawk and hang him high as Haman—fer hirin' killers to get Joe Thompson."

He said no more. But his mind was busy. Back there Conroy had very plainly indicated that he knew those two bandits were dead. Yet he'd still been in a panic. Under Blue's prodding hints, he'd all but committed suicide—reached crazily for a gun with the Kid's Colt actually out and covering him.

Now why? Blue simply couldn't picture the cold-blooded gambler he had known getting that reckless over no more than a few missing dollars. Fear, murder madness, had flared in that ex-tinhorn's eyes.

They were racing east, straight back toward the Amarillas, the giant hills from which they had ridden that dawn. The narrow mouth of a gulch was dead ahead, perhaps a mile off.

The three riders behind had spread out in a wide line, extending to the south. They seemed quite satisfied to let their quarry make that draw. But with a snarling laugh, the Kid veered northward.

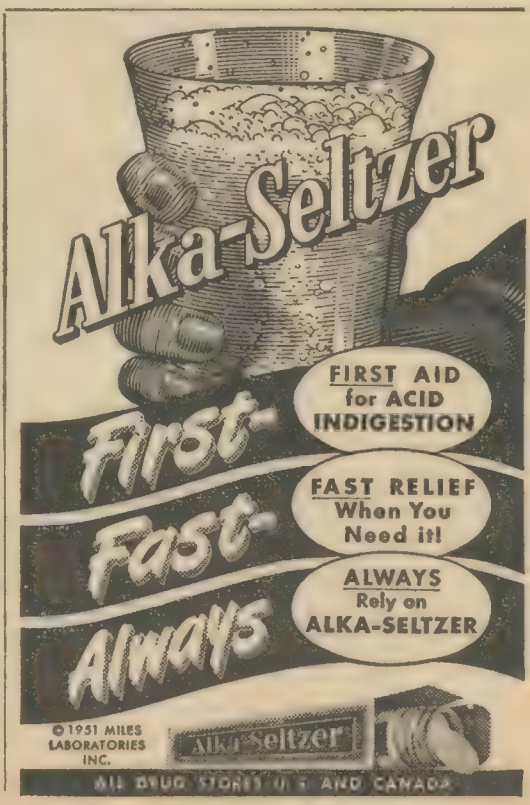
"Blind canyon," he explained. "Reckon they'd like to pen us—" His voice chopped off, with a sobbing gasp. "Oh, oh! Look yonder, Blue! There's more of 'em!"

Over a low roll to the northwest, three new horsemen had popped into sight. They were riding furiously to head the fugitives to the north, pin them against the bluffs. And now, abruptly, the original trio of pursuers also came to life. Shouting, shooting, they swung their line, striving to block the path south.

"Now you know what Conroy went fer!" With an oath, Blue Steele spun his flying pony. "South, Kid! South, quick! Hang, rattle and ride, or they damn sure got us!"

Twenty feet ahead, the Kid already was whirling, slashing off on the new tangent like a harried rabbit.

To continue northeast now would be fatal. To dive into that canyon equally so, in the end. There remained only the chance of riding out from under that swinging, southern line.



Blue snapped up his Winchester, and snarling flame lanced from its muzzle. Riding with dropped rein, Blue was working on that trio, pounding furiously at the end man.

What happened to that man, the Kid never knew. One instant he was there, charging crazily. The next he was gone. Before the Kid could see where, there came a smashing shock, striking his left shoulder. Blackness leaped at him. . . .

He knew he was hit. Dimly, he realized that he must also stay in his saddle. With a great effort of will, he stemmed back the dark, caught at his horn. Then he knew that he was deathly sick, that each plunge of the running horse brought a grinding agony, that guns were talking all around him. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Back to the Box K

WHEN he came back to a clearer consciousness, he realized Blue was hurriedly helping him down. They were in a rocky ravine. Lead was striking above them, ricocheting off with weird whistles. Easing him down, Blue whirled, bounced up to a niche and levered back three quick shots. His grin was anxious as he ducked back.

"How you feel, Kid? Tough?"

The Kid bit back a groan. "They ain't got me yet. Not by a dang sight!"

"That's talkin'!" Blue was swiftly baring the wound. "Can you move your arm, button?"

The Kid tried, vainly. Beads of sweat stood out on his face from the pain. "Mebbe it's just shock, Blue," he muttered.

"Yeah. Lay still." Blue snatched at his rifle. This time when he ducked down his smile was grim.

"We're a gonna have to ride some more, pardner. Unless we're willin' to stay here permanent. Those fellere are sure intendin' to rub us out. And if they get us ringed, they will."

He dragged off his bandanna, wrapping it tightly about the boy's wound. The big rifle bullet had struck about midway of the upper arm, ranging upward.

"Now I'll make you a sorta sling, with your shirt tail. And here, wrap your coat back around it, too. Now, one minute and we'll hightail."

Something dropped out of an inside pocket of that coat as Blue leaped again toward the rim of rocks. Waveringly, the Kid picked it up. It was a crumpled envelope. He started to drop it again. And then, dazedly realizing it might be valuable, he pocketed it once more.

Blue was scrambling hurriedly back down to him again. "All right, Kid," he sang out. "Here we go. This draw seems to lead clear on up into the hills."

"It does." Spunkily, the Kid shook the haze out of his brain. "I know where we are now, Blue. Come on, I'm with you."

But he would have fallen as he tried to mount, had it not been for Blue Catching him up, the big gunfighter swung him bodily into the saddle.

For the first hundred yards, luck rode with them. The firing behind told plainly their flight had not yet been detected. Then they had to pass a place where the ravine flattened. Immediately a volley tore at them, coming evidently from some of their pursuers who had been working around in their rear.

Snarling like a wolf, Blue emptied his Colt at them. Somebody screamed, a high, choking note of mortal agony. The jarring impacts of his frightened pony's leaps again were driving wave on wave of pain through the Kid's smashed shoulder. Then they were behind cover again. They were between high rock walls, where the gulch really became a canyon.

But after that it was mostly pretty hazy —like a nightmare, or an endless terrible struggle through fog that was splashed with

the blaze of guns, spaced with savage interludes.

He would remember best those interludes. Blue, standing in the trail, guns beating a tocsin of death, while the Kid held the horses, just around the turn. Or Blue, laughing coldly as he worked his Winchester from the saddle. Or the episode high up in the broken ledges, where the maze of passages had spewed two surprised flankers right onto them, while Blue waited to beat back the pack behind.

Like a wolf himself, wounded but still deadly, the Kid had shot the foremost of that pair—before the man could jerk up his gun, before Blue could whirl. Then he and Blue together had got the other.

There were plenty of places where Blue might have stopped, made a stand and held out indefinitely. But with scanty ammunition and no possible hope of help save by his own efforts, he didn't dare allow himself to be pinned down. His only chance, the Kid's only chance, was to slip clean away from these killers.

A few thousand missing dollars wasn't enough reason for Bland Conroy to spend his gunmen so furiously. There had to be some good cause why he should be fighting so crazily to shut their mouths forever.

PERHAPS it was about noon when the swift mountain storm broke. It came in a rolling, black cloud, a fusillade of lightning, then a blinding, torrential roar of icy rain. Momentarily the chill shock of it revived the reeling Kid. He straightened in his saddle and found that Blue's arm was about him. They were descending a broken slope, sparsely timbered with cedar.

Head bent against the solid sheets of water, Blue pulled over abruptly into the scant shelter of one of the cedars. He bent close, and the Kid could see the grim anxiety on his seamed, wet face. The Kid tried to grin at him, and instantly Blue grinned back.

"Wakin' up, button?" Blue lifted his voice cheerfully against the roaring beat of rain. "Well, I reckon they've run us just about as far out this way as we're goin'. Now if this sprinkle will only hide us long enough, we're gonna try and double on 'em, an' go right back."

He twisted, peering back through the gloomy downpour, shaking his head slightly. "We'll have to get you to a doctor, button. We're goin' back to the Box K. Where the Thompsons, I hope, will be downright glad to see us." With a grin, he broke off. "Anyways, they oughta be," he added. "Does seem like this concerns them even more'n it does us."

Alone, he wouldn't have been troubled a bit. To outfight, outfox these Conroy killers would have been old stuff. But the wounded Kid made it different.

The youngster was dead game. He hadn't let out a whimper the whole time. But with the constant jar of riding breaking it open, that wound never had quit bleeding entirely. Blue couldn't bandage it tightly enough to make it stop and stay stopped.

Nor was the Box K, right now, as distant as it might have been, either. Blue had been thinking ahead for some time. As far as he could, hard pressed and not knowing these mountains, he had been trying to circle.

His idea was quite simple. They were close, he knew that. He would go straight back toward them, lie doggo in one of these cedar clumps and let them—if they would—go right on by. He hoped it would work.

Back almost to the crest of the slope, he picked a small clump and threshed in, dismounting. The brief stimulus brought by the rain had left the Kid now. Gently, Steele lifted him down. Shaking water out of his eyes, he laid his hands on the ivory handles of his guns, crouched, waiting.

He didn't have to wait long. Almost immediately, through the downpour he made out the vague shadows of horsemen topping the crest. Cautiously, they spread out, just

as he had expected, moving slowly down the slope. Two of them passed so close by that even through the roar of rain he heard the soft, snarling voice of one.

But they didn't see him. They were looking for the fugitives to hole up in solid rock cover.

They passed, vanished. Lightning split down from the black rolling sky and the echo of its thunder was deafening. Blue lifted the Kid into the saddle again, balanced him there, then quickly forked his own tired mount.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Blue again rode slowly into the Box K ranch yard. He was riding double now, cradling the Kid in his arms. He'd had to halt again and again to ease the youngster and to keep that bleeding down. But it was stopped, and furthermore the Kid was conscious, though weak.

There was a buckboard and team in the yard and several saddle horses. A little knot of grim-faced men talked in low tones by the porch. As Blue halted, they turned, staring.

Somebody gave a startled exclamation. A tall, bronzed young cowman came quickly toward him. Hobbling behind, Blue saw old Pancake Carter, his leathery face twisting, distressed.

"It's Bud Randlett!" the old cook cried.

"Ain't dead," croaked the Kid faintly and tried to grin. "It was—mostly them biscuits—of yours, Pancake. Hi, Frank."

They were all running to help now. As gently as they could, they carried him into the house. An elderly woman with reddened eyes met them at the door. Behind her were two other women, one middle-aged, the other just a girl.

Even with the marks of grief on her young face, that slim, tanned girl was the loveliest thing Blue Steele had ever seen. Remembering the Kid's awkwardly fervent description, he knew instantly that she must be Ann Thompson.

"Bud!" she cried in a frightened voice.

Her very tone told enough. The Kid feebly tried to apologize for his appearance.

"I—I'm sorry I'm so messy, Ann."

"We've been trying to find you for a long time, Bud Randlett," interrupted Mrs. Thompson quietly. "Messy or not, you're home."

With the efficiency of the frontier woman she took charge, sending Ann flying for cloths and hot water, and stripping off the sodden coat, baring the ugly wound. Nodding briskly, she turned.

"You, Frank, ride and get Doc Barnaby. And the rest of you men clear out. I'll take care of the boy."

Blue grinned at the Kid and turned obediently, scurrying after the fast-moving Frank. He was satisfied that his partner was in good hands. Now his mind turned swiftly to further precautions.

"Hold on a minute, will you?" he said hurriedly, catching up with the young cowman. "You're Frank Thompson?"

"Yes." The cowman nodded. "And you're Blue Steele, aren't you? Pancake told us you and Bud had—"

"Your dad is dead?" broke in Blue. "Then you're head of this outfit, ain't you? I'll have to talk with you. Can you send somebody else fer the doc?"

Frank nodded again. "Yes. Sure, Joe can go. My brother." He beckoned to a younger replica of himself.

BLUE drew the two to one side, on the porch. "I guess you better light right out for that sawbones," he told the younger boy. "Only, just don't let it spread who you're bringin' him fer, savvy? It's better Bland Conroy don't learn too quick where the Kid is."

Joe nodded and broke for the horses. Face grim, Frank Thompson stared. "Meaning it was Conroy shot Bud?" he demanded.

"His gunmen," corrected Blue. "He set 'em on us." Hesitating, he glanced mean-

ingfully at the silent, puzzled group on the edge of the porch. "These ain't all your people, are they?" he asked.

"Neighbors, and good friends," assented Frank. "They won't talk, if that's what you mean. They don't like Conroy any better than we do."

"You think he had your dad 'bushed, do you?" asked Blue swiftly. "Did your dad tell you anything like that, before he died?"

"He never recovered consciousness." Frank's mouth tightened. "But one of Eskridge's punchers saw it happen. Those two killers just rode out of the brush and shot him down. There was ten dollars in his pocket, but they never touched it."

"Did they take anything at all off him?"

"I don't know. But whether they did or not, why did they ride straight back to the bank? Why—unless they were Bland Conroy's hired killers? Plain bank robbers wouldn't have drawn attention to themselves that way—killing an innocent man first, for no reason!"

His face was white with passion. "I can't prove it. But I think Conroy set those killers on. When they realized they'd been seen, they decided to make him pay them, quick and plenty. So they just rode by and robbed him before fogging out. God, if only we could catch those two gunmen! Get them to talk!"

"The Kid and me, we did meet up with 'em," said Blue, very softly.

"You did!" The breath went over Frank Thompson's lips in a harsh rasp. "Then did—did they—"

"Tell us anything?" Blue shook his head ruefully. "No. Before they got around to it, they were both sorta dead. Tried a six-gun horse trade on us last night, and, well . . ."

"Didn't you find any papers on them, anything?" persisted Frank desperately. "It's barely possible Dad had something Conroy wanted. Some letter or paper. And those killers might have kept it."

"Feelin' sorta boogery after the trigger-in', we fogged it without searchin' the jaspers," regretted Blue. He casually failed to mention taking the money. "But, say. The Kid did borrow a coat. Mebbe—"

He broke off, swinging hurriedly into the home aagin. "Ma'am, can I ask him jest one question?" he implored Mrs. Thompson. And then, at her nod, "Kid, seems to me I got a hazy recollection of a letter fallin' outa this coat. Right after you were shot. You notice?"

The Kid nodded weakly. "Yeah. It's in the side pocket."

IT WAS blood-blackened, water-soaked, a pulpy shred. But as Blue deciphered the badly smeared address, his eyes widened joyously.

With a quick, warning glance at Frank, a soothing word to the Kid, he tiptoed out.

"Look here!" his whisper was excited. "A letter addressed to your dad. And in that outlaw's pocket! Let's get in the kitchen or somewheres, where you can spread it out on a table. It's soppin'."

Eyes wide, staring, Frank Thompson led the way. His hands shook as he took the letter. Laboriously, he extracted the single, folded sheet. Or part of a sheet, rather. Perhaps a third of both letter and envelope had been torn away.

Spreading it flat, he bent close.

Evidently written with poor ink to begin with, the wet paper was one smeary blur. Blood and water had done their worst.

"Can't you make any of it out at all?" Blue's voice was anxious. "Hell's bells, man, you got to read it! It's why Conroy had your dad killed. It must be!"

Frank was trying hard. "It's to Dad, all right," he agreed hoarsely. "It says, 'Dear Joe. Received your—letter,' I guess it is." He shook his head despairingly over the next few lines. " 'Close.' No, it must be 'Enclosed.' Yes. 'Enclosed is my—my check!' "

His eyes jerked up at Blue's savage, exultant exclamation.

"Now I get it! A check. And, great gosh, no wonder Conroy was loco. We had the deadwood on him and didn't know it!" He raced on with explanation as the puzzled Frank shook his head. "Don't you see? It's about that note your dad had due at Conroy's bank. Pancake told us he was tryin' to get the money. Well, he must have got it. A check, in this letter. Yesterday when he got his mail. There's no other reason anybody's be sendin' him a check, is there?"

"Not that I know of," stammered Frank. "And he had been writin' around tryin'—"

"Yeah. Well, he got it. He took it to Conroy. But, since Conroy wouldn't turn over the note just for a check, why your dad must've had to deposit that check for collection. When it cleared, why Conroy would have to give him the note. And meantime, he had Conroy's receipt. Most likely a deposit slip.

"But Conroy didn't aim to let your dad pay that note," Blue went on. "He wanted to use it as a way to grab more of your ranch here. But if he could have your dad 'gulched on the way home and this letter and deposit stolen, why he'd still be settin' pretty. He could tear up the check, get judgment on the note. And even if you did learn later somebody had sent your dad the money, why you still couldn't prove a thing.

"So that's what he did. But havin' to use pick-up killers, he slipped. They bungled the job, came right back on him and kept the papers too. Enough to blow him sky high, if he let 'em get caught."

With a sudden thought, he spun toward the door. "Wait. I'll get that coat. Now if only that deposit slip is in it, too!"

ALMOST immediately he reappeared with the bloodsoaked garment, literally turning it inside out. But there was nothing more to be found.

"Boy, I just know that's what happened," he groaned. "And there was a deposit slip. There must've been! Likely right with this letter. We lost it, that's all."

He gestured despairingly toward the letter. "Can you make out that signature? Or the postmark? Anything at all to give you a clue who might've sent it."

Frank tried again, vainly. "Dad had a lot of friends who would have helped him, if they could," he said. "Maybe I could write to all of them. . . ."

"But Conroy could still say he never saw the check," said Blue. "And with no receipt to prove different . . ." He broke off.

"Me, I'm an outlaw, Thompson," he said at last, harshly. "In court my word wouldn't be worth a damn. Bland Conroy is shore to hire the slickest lawyers in the country. And with no more than this smear to back up your charges, why, I'm wonderin' . . ."

He did not finish. But, understandingly, Frank Thompson nodded. His voice was a grim, chill whisper when at last he spoke.

"Yeah. Mebbe he could squirm out of court charges. But there's a—surer way." His hand moved down to his gun.

"Quicker, mebbe," dissented Blue. "I dunno how good you are with a Colt. But Conroy's a whiz. And backed by hired guns aplenty. You might lose."

His smile was crooked, mirthless. "You got a mother and sister dependin' on you, son," he remained. "While, even if you kill him, that still don't pay your note. It don't bring back what he's stolen from your dad or from the Randletts. You see?"

For a long moment their eyes locked. Then Frank Thompson asked quietly, "You got a different idea?"

Blue nodded. "A way that may get back at least a little fer what he stole. A way to pay off a killer in his own coin." Eyes slitted, he stretched a hand for the letter. "Let me have this. And loan me a fresh mount and some cartridges," he said softly. "After that, it's really better that you don't know where I go or what I'm doing."

He made a little, quick gesture. "The Kid—Bud—is my pardner," he explained

simply. "This is his quarrel as well as yours. And now it's also mine. Will you trust me to do what's right?"

Frank Thompson stared down into that gaunt face. "I'll trust you, Steele," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Boothill Partners

ATOP a brushy ridge just outside the little cattle town of Escarbada, an outlaw crouched next morning. From his high covert he could look down on the single, straggling street. He could see that the bank had not yet opened. But the man for whom he was waiting was inside. He knew that. Ten minutes ago he had seen him ride up, hitch his horse at the rack by the side door.

Now two other men went in that side door. That made four inside, undoubtedly all armed. Strolling up the sidewalk came still another man, big-hatted, bulky. Morning sunlight winked brightly on something silver on his vest. That one must be the marshal.

He strolled on to the corner. The bank shades were going up now. Somebody opened the door. With a faint, taut smile, the watching outlaw laid his hands on the ivory handles of his Colts.

Fading back into the thicket, he mounted his horse. There was a tiny Box K on the pony's shoulder. Strapped on the saddle was a dusty sack. It seemed quite heavy for its size.

Circling, the lean rider cut into the trail, going into town at an easy canter. He lit down at a hitchrack just outside eye range from the bank windows. As he unstrapped the sack, he noted that from the corner the marshal was eyeing him curiously. The outlaw's eyes narrowed just the tiniest trifle. Nodding a curt good morning, he cuddled the sack in his left arm and went quickly into the bank.

The transition from brilliant sunlight to shadow made it hard to see for an instant. He blinked. But, even before his eyes focused, he could sense the sudden, panicky deadliness in that silence. Then he saw Conroy.

The ex-gambler was standing at a desk inside a waist-high rail. He had a gun out and leveled. And his face was no suave mask now. It was the visage of a cornered wolf.

"You, Steele," he said in a thick gabble.

"Howdy, Faro." Blue Steele smiled coldly. "I've brought you something. Say, why the gun? Put it up!"

He came leisurely through the gate in the railing. The sack made a chinking noise as he laid it on the desk. "There's some money you'll likely remember, Faro," he drawled. "Now tell your cashier to take his hands off whatever he's holdin'. And likewise that gunner in back yonder. I'm only returnin' the cash them outlaws took."

Frightened or not, Bland Conroy couldn't

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miss the sharp emphasis on that *only*. "Only the cash," he repeated. And the flicker of understanding in his eyes in turn dissolved Blue's last, faint doubt. Conroy had had Thompson 'gulched, just as Blue had figured. And he had not recovered even that missing deposit slip.

"It's all right, boys. All right." The banker slid his gun out of sight, turning toward his staring men. And then, as they would have surged curiously toward him, "Hold on! Me and this—this man have to talk private."

He was getting over his first panic now. Bewilderment and a cold murder lust mixed on his face as he stared from Blue to the sack. "You—you want to step into my private office?" he asked.

"This'll do." Blue perched on the desk, grinning. "We can talk low. Set down, Conroy. You're guessin' what I came for?"

"Some kind of blackmail, I suppose," Conroy sneered.

The grin faded from Blue Steele's leathery face. "Blackmail?" he repeated. "Listen, I'm doin' you a favor, instead. Lettin' you get away with mighty small repayment for what you done to Joe Thompson and Randlett and his dad. Blackmail, you call it?"

His hand fumbled in his pocket and come out with a crumpled, bloodstained envelope. Once again the maddened, panicky glare of the ex-gambler's eyes betrayed him, confirming for Blue a detail he had guessed, but could not know.

"Seen this before, haven't you?" Steele's voice was an icy lash. "Well, the letter and everything that was with it is in safe hands. And if you balk at the bargain I'm offering, it all goes straight to the Thompsons. You understand?"

TWICE Conroy tried before he could speak. "Go on," he snarled.

"Not wantin' any part of blood money, we're turnin' this back to you." Blue touched the sack. "Here it is—what you paid Ben and Slim to kill Thompson. Or what they forced you to pay."

He hesitated, then went on. "But now, in return, you're gonna put an equal amount to Bud Randlett's credit. You're gonna mark Joe Thompson's note paid and give it to me. And you're gonna hand over that check Joe left with you for collection."

Conroy's mouth tightened. "And if I do?" he said. "If I do?"

Blue grinned coldly. "If you keep your bargain, I promise this evidence won't turn up against you. It'll stay lost. I won't tell the Thompsons about the brags Ben and Slim made before the ruckus. And without this evidence, my story, why no matter what the Thompsons suspect, they can't prove—"

"Your story!" Conroy's interruption was a maddened jeer. "Why, you damn outlaw! You think your testimony would be believed in any court? Take your story and evidence to the Thompsons and I'll show you! I'll deny that's my signature on that deposit slip. I can bring up your record and send you back to the pen. I'll hire the slickest lawyers in the country to prove I'm absolutely innocent and you and Randlett and the Thompsons were just trying to blackmail me."

"Can you convince Joe Thompson's and Jack Randlett's friends too?" asked Blue, very softly. "If you think you can, why there's the marshal, peekin' in the window. Go ahead, call him in."

His grin was pitiless, mocking. "But, before you do, think hard. Between 'em, they tell me, Jack Randlett and Joe Thompson were friends to just about every honest cowman in these parts. Fellers that hate range-hog murderers, Faro. Hate 'em plenty. An' should the Thompsons and Jack Randlett's son both swear that you had Joe killed—and tried to kill Bud—why, you think you'd live to reach court?"

His eyes flashed warning as Conroy jerked convulsively. "Don't reach for that gun again. Mebbe you could've killed me

and got away safe when I first came in. But you'll notice I got a hand on a gun now. Make a play and I'll kill you. Want to see?"

Bland Conroy's face turned white with rage, then, slowly, the plump hands came up in a sullen, beaten gesture.

"You win. All right, I'll pay. I guess—your word's good."

ONE by one Bland Conroy assembled the required papers. Joe Thompson's note, duly marked "Paid." A bank book and signed deposit slip crediting Bud Randlett with an account of five thousand dollars. A check made out to and endorsed by Joe Thompson, signed by one Frank Morgan, on a San Antonio bank. Now the Thompsons could send that check back, uncashed, with thanks.

"I could ask you to give me a receipt for this loot, too," murmured Blue ironically, opening the sack. "But, never mind. Your gratitude, I reckon, will be enough."

He pocketed his little stack of papers, started toward the door. Then with a sudden grin, he halted.

"Oh, yeah," he added. "I promised not to let this evidence turn up. But I didn't promise to keep Bud Randlett from talkin'. Or the Thompsons and their friends from listenin' to him and suspectin' plenty."

He was grinning as he continued. "The Thompsons and their friends might get so suspicious they'd just come and lynch you, even without proof, if they find you. Since I don't want you to blame me if they do, I'm just explainin'. There were visitors and a meetin' at the Box K when I come by."

He passed on out into the street, leaving a dead silence behind.

The marshal still was lingering on the edge of the worn, board sidewalk. It wasn't another holdup, he was sure now. But he bent a coldly suspicious eye on Blue, who nodded cheerfully.

"Hombre," said the lawman, "haven't I seen your face somewhere before?"

Blue scratched his head. "Why, yeah, I wouldn't be surprised," he agreed.

Unhurried, and yet not too slowly, he swung toward his horse, unhitching and climbing aboard. A reward notice, very likely, was the "somewhere" this John Law was trying to remember. With a mild grin Blue jolted him off the track, gesturing toward the bank door.

"Just brought Conroy in a sack o' somethin' right interestin', Marshal," he informed innocently. "He's mighty happy about it. Go and ask him to let you see."

He loped away. As he glanced back, he saw that the marshal was going into the bank. With a chuckle, he wondered just what kind of a lame yarn the maddened Mr. Conroy would tell on such short notice.

He wasted no time in getting out of town and out of sight. But he did not go far. Cautiously circling ino his brush covert again, he settled down to another watchful wait.

More people were stirring in the little town now. But there was no sign of any excitement or pursuit. Presently the marshal came out of the bank again, shaking his head bewilderedly. He headed across the street toward the saloon. Blue grinned.

A quartet of punchers came loping down the street, piling off in front of the saloon. Blue was just beginning to wonder how much longer he would have to wait, when, abruptly, he went tense.

Conroy was coming out. He was carrying a pair of saddle bags. Quickly, he adjusted them over his horse and swung up. A savage, eager light in his eyes, Blue Steele nodded. He waited just long enough to make sure which road the ex-gambler was taking before leaping for his own pony and starting out.

Conroy was doing exactly what Blue had expected him to. Probably with just about all the important money in that bank now in those saddlebags, he was running. From the way he had headed, Blue judged he did not even intend to go by his ranch. Or

perhaps he meant to slip furtively in, after dark.

At a slashing run, Blue Steele cut across to head that flight. Breathless, he burst into the winding, thicket-fenced road at the foot of the first ridge east of town. The road was empty. For an instant, with a quick, sinking feeling, he thought perhaps the fugitive had taken another way. Then he heard the hoof-beats of the oncoming horse.

Before he could more than turn, mount and rider were on him. With a snarling cry, Bland Conroy reined in. His hand was under his coat. His eyes were as deadly cold, alert as those of a coiled rattler.

"Well, Steele?" he asked in a flat voice. "What now?"

"Just thought, since you're runnin' off, I'd make you an even simpler proposition," Blue answered softly. "That is, do you want to try shootin' it out with me? Or would you prefer goin' back with me and explainin' to your depositors why you got the bank's money in your saddle bags?"

"Why, there's no money in these bags." Conroy's hand slid empty from under his coat, and he twisted, starting to unstrap one of the saddle bags. "No, and I'm not running away. Here, look for—"

It came so quickly that, even watchful as he was, Blue Steele was almost cut short. From nowhere, Conroy materialized a derringer. Like a blue bullet itself, it licked up with blurring speed. Its first slug struck the horn of Steele's saddle, burned over his thigh.

Then Blue's right-hand Colt was snarling. Once, twice, and there was no need for a third shot. But he gave it, mercilessly. The derringer in Bland Conroy's grip drove its second big slug into the dust as he fell. He lay on his face, still.

Blue did not even dismount. Catching the trailing reins of Conroy's horse, he looped them quickly about a limb. There was money in the saddle bags. Many packets of currency, but he gave them only a casual glance, strapping the flap down again.

The sound of the shots almost certainly would be drawing someone from town, to investigate. Conroy's abrupt departure hardly could have gone unnoticed. And these saddle bags should tell their own mute story.

SLIDING into the brush again, Blue slipped toward town until he saw the big hat of the marshal bobbing above the limbs. There were more riders behind him. Blue waited until they had passed by. Then he faded, circling the town again, heading swiftly northwest.

He was going toward the Box K. Perhaps halfway there he hid behind a clump of mesquite while a swift riding party went by. They were the two Thompson boys and a half dozen others, all armed. Just what their mission was in town Blue could only guess. But it made no difference now. The play was over.

He smiled as he rode on. In Blue Steele's own bitter youth there had been no partner to help him out and keep him off the outlaw trail. With the Kid, it would be different.

Whether or not the Kid ever would be permitted to draw on this new bank account, Blue Steele could not know. But, somehow, he was intuitively sure all of his arrangements would be let stand.

What he had done would appeal strongly to the sense of simple justice in these plain, square-shooting, hard-bitten people. Making a hog and murderer pay for his crimes, pay in both life and money—who could deny the righteousness of that?

So he sang, softly, tunelessly, to himself. When he left the Box K this time, there would be no Kid riding at his side. But there would be good friends left behind. One real friend, all straightened out again, facing a happy future—that was something!

THE END

THE INJUN SHIRT

He held her wrist as he stared out the window. Anything could happen now, with the Key Saw men in town. . . .

By FRANCIS H. AMES

Only the truth could stop the coming range war. But how could Cole McGraw tell the woman he loved that he was her brother's killer?

THE STREET was quiet and sticky hot, although the sun was barely up over hills murky with smoke from a distant brush fire. Men turned to watch Bert Tolliver ride down the main drag of Gray Butte with a dead man across his

saddle. Tolliver sagged in his tree, his wise eyes steady in his wind-burned face. Beside him rode Barney Small, short, wide, and all whang leather. The two Key Saw punchers knew that the body they carried would bring gunflame ripping across the Gray Butte range, yet their faces were carefully composed, their anxiety well concealed.

He ramrodded good men on Key Saw, Cole McGraw thought—it didn't take them long to find him. The thought brought a sinking hollowness to McGraw's stomach. A man found himself facing the music often in Montana, but seldom such music as this.

Emmet Burse, beefy owner of the Rocket outfit, was riding toward Bert Tolliver with his foreman, Frank Remere, and shifty-eyed Artie Kerr beside him. McGraw made a quick mental note of the fact that Smoke Desertell was not in his accustomed place beside Burse. When the Rocket men saw the burden Tolliver carried, they pulled up in the street, milling about, their voices indistinct to McGraw.

Those who watched knew that the identity of the man across Bert Tolliver's saddle was something that might well start the Rocket-Key Saw war that had been a dark, brooding thing over the community for months, ever since Key Saw had began to lose stock in the spring. The town held its breath now, as it always did when death rode down between its sun-faded buildings. In a few moments, McGraw knew, it would exhale with explosive viciousness.

The dead man's head hung limply down, the face hidden against Bert's strawberry roan, dried blood a dark snake between the shoulders. He looked as if he'd been shot in the back, McGraw thought, but he hadn't. McGraw knew, because he had killed Bass Grunow, high-flying son of Key Saw, hardly two hours back, as the sun came up over the hog-backed ridges of Little Cedar. How did a man go about telling his boss that he had killed his son? How did a man go about telling the woman he planned to marry that he had killed her brother?

Men moved forward now, gathering like bees about honey. Excited voices shattered the muggy silence of the street. McGraw straightened, knowing that he'd have to move, hitching up his cartridge belt from long habit. Then he saw Cora Grunow come out of the hotel, start down the steps, her eyes on the group about her father's two riders. McGraw's heels thudded on the boardwalk as he moved hastily to intercept her. She turned her fine eyes toward him and they lighted up with relief at his presence.

"What is it, Cole?" she asked anxiously. "Have Barney and Bert run into trouble?"

"If they have," McGraw said quietly, "they took the hump out of it, Cora. I'll mosey over and have a look. Better go back in the hotel."

"Be careful, Cole," she said, lightly touching his arm. "Key Saw doesn't want trouble. Not with Rocket—not with anyone. I'll be in my room. Let me know what you find out."

McGRAW was an inch over six feet, yet she came higher than his shoulder, a slim, smoothly built woman, with a fire in her—blonde, finely cut features, her father's firm chin. Her touch burned on McGraw's arm, bringing a fleeting look of tenderness for her through the whang-leather hardness that was so much a part of him. He laid a hand on her shoulder, and the hand settled and firmed, swaying her body toward him. Her eyes softened, became warmly sultry.

"Cole McGraw!" she gasped. "Not here in the street!"

Not here, McGraw thought, not anywhere. If I don't kiss you now, Cora Grunow, I'll never kiss you again, for I have killed your brother. Right or wrong, it will stand between us forever. The thought was something that wrenched his insides, laid a cold, clammy hand over his heart.

The voice of Emmet Burse cut in between them like the slash of a down-chopping quirt.

"If that's a Rocket man, Tolliver," he roared. "I'll drag you feet first through hell."

McGraw pushed Cora toward the hotel as he swiveled to stalk up to the group, his face set in the hard lines of authority.

"I'll have something to say about that, Emmet," he snapped. "Let me through, boys—what goes on here?"

The crowd parted respectfully, but Frank Remere urged his horse forward with raked spurs, driving its shoulder against McGraw. Remere's thin, high-cheekboned features were tight with anger, his almost colorless eyes glittered. I'll have to kill you some day, McGraw thought, as he grasped the bit, driving Remere's mount back on its haunches. He took a step backward, finding himself between Barney Small and Bert Tolliver.

"Lower your horns, McGraw," Remere challenged, "or I'll knock 'em off. You're talking to Rocket now."

"Odds is even," Bert Tolliver drawled. "Let her flicker if you've a mind to, Remere. Key Saw's ready."

This was the dangerous mood of Key Saw. A single word, a quick, unguarded movement, and guns would talk between the two outfits. This seemed the long-awaited showdown, but it didn't explode into action. Sid Cantrell, the mustached saloon owner, killed it before it could begin.

"You're off base, Remere," he cried. "That ain't no Rocket hand—that's Bass Grunow. Do you know what I think, McGraw . . ."

"Shut up!" McGraw's voice was harsh. "You ain't doing the thinking for Key Saw, Cantrell. I'll get the story from my own men. Get young Grunow off that horse and inside, Tolliver. Anyone sent for the old man?"

"We sent for Jake," Barney Small's voice was flat. "He oughta be here soon."

They carried Bass into the shadows of the low room, laid him out before the bar where he had so often drank. Men took off their Stetsons, to stand with lowered heads and averted eyes. One dead man is the same as another, McGraw thought, and this one was meaner than most, but he's the son of Jake Grunow. Hell's going to pop wide open, with me in the crack.

It had been a fair shake, out there in Little Cedar, as fair shakes go, with Winchesters talking on both sides, and a beef cow tied down in the middle beside a branding fire. A branding fire at dawn, a running man, shooting back. There had been no reason why McGraw should not fire. Any Key Saw man would have done the same.

Bass Grunow had pinwheeled from his saddle into a clump of buffalo berry brush, while his horse had gone galloping on, with stirrups flopping.

The details of the action stood out starkly in McGraw's mind. He could feel the cool touch of the Winchester stock as it lay against his cheek, the way the front sight blade snugged down into the rear notch as he followed the galloping figure, twisted about to shoot back at him. He recalled just how much he'd led the man, how high he'd allowed for long range, the way he'd squeezed the trigger, carefully, as a man does that knows his business. A trigger squeeze is something a man can never undo—if his aim is good.

"We found him," Bert Tolliver said, turning his Stetson around and around in his rope-burned hands, "in the brush on the east side of Little Cedar Canyon. Noticed the buzzards circlin'."

"Did you look for sign?" McGraw's voice was carefully controlled. He knew these men that he commanded. He knew that they had looked for sign, and knowing where they'd look, and how, he'd made certain this morning that they'd not find any.

"He was a careful hombre," Tolliver said. "Circled clean around the spot twice before he came down to look at his man. Tethered his horse in the brush, high, and slithered down on his face. Took a look at Bass and then hit for the shale rock—we lost the sign there."

"It was a running fight, Cole," Barney Small cut in. "Bass had emptied his wheel. Had his carbine out when he went down. Drove the barrel into sod clean to the action, with a fired hull half levered out. The other gent opened with a Winchester from the west slope."

THEY had gone over the ground, as good men will, drawn a mental picture of the fight, but they didn't find the ashes of the branding fire, or the cow, McGraw thought—I hid the fire and I choused the cow over the ridge. Jake Grunow wouldn't want it known that his son was altering Key Saw brands at dawn.

"Some stock sign on the bottoms," Barney said. "Sorta mixed up. We don't run no stock in Little Cedar these days. Me and Bart just happened to be prowling around up there. You know, Cole . . ."

McGraw silenced Barney with a look. He knew. Key Saw didn't run stock in Little Cedar now, not since stock had begun to disappear. Little Cedar led to shale at its head. It would be too easy to drive brand-changed beef from there north to the Little Missouri country. Shale rock makes a trail hard to find. Bert and Barney had been out prowling because McGraw had given them orders to prowl. But McGraw had beaten them to it this morning, thinking that the low smoke haze might make rustlers careless. A branding fire shows at night, and it sends up smoke signals by day. On a hazy morning it is hard to see. Bass Grunow had been careless.

Evidently Bass had needed more hell-raising money than Jake Grunow cared to give him. There had been friction between father and son over that of late. It takes money to court a girl like Edda Savenough. McGraw thought about the rounded, dark-haired girl who worked in the Gray Butte hotel.

She was a woman to twist the insides of a youngster like Bass. She was a woman to hit any man hard where he lived. McGraw had felt her fire and shied away from it. Edda had an eye for a man, and a soft way of talking, swaying toward a man as she talked, moving away a teasing little if he reached, willing and ready and letting a man know it. How much money did Bass Grunow need to make her forget to move away that teasing little? How much money did any man need?

McGraw was thinking about Edda when Jake Grunow burst into the room, his eyes wild with apprehension. Jake was big, and he was hard as steel, but he had been a fair boss to McGraw. He would have made a fine father-in-law. Cole McGraw had a soft spot in him for Big Jake Grunow that had grown with the years.

Jake's eyes fastened themselves on Emmet Burse, and violent anger bloomed in his face. Then his glance dropped to the still figure on the floor, and all temper seemed to flow out of him. His face grayed. He moved out a shaking hand to pull back the blanket that covered the dead face of his son. Then he straightened. As he turned to confront Emmet Burse his hand dropped to his gun butt.

"Damn you, Burse!" he yelled. "I'll have your heart and your guts. I'll gather my crew and blast Rocket from the face of the earth."

There wasn't a man in the room that doubted him. It was what they had expected, what they were waiting for—a declaration of war. Twenty-odd men on a side, and blood would run in Gray Butte's streets.

"Not so fast, Jake," McGraw said. "Maybe Rocket ain't in on this."

It seemed a small thing, this word of

caution in a court of Colt justice, but coming from the foreman of Key Saw it stunned the room. Grunow had made his decision, tossed down his threat and his challenge. Right or wrong, that should be enough for any man who took Key Saw's pay. Cole saw astonishment come into the eyes of Grunow. The faces of Barney and Bert were first incredulous, then puzzled, for they knew their foreman well.

"Hell," Grunow spat out, "you're crazy, Cole. We've been losing stock, and all along we knew it was Rocket behind it. All we needed was the goods on 'em. Now we've got it. Bass caught them and they shot him."

Losing stock, yes, McGraw told himself, ten or twenty head a month. Enough at rustler's sales prices to furnish pocket money to a couple or three hell-raising punchers. Not enough to interest a man like Emmet Burse. Stealing Key Saw stock or not, Rocket didn't shoot Bass. He raised his hand for attention, moving a step toward Grunow, confession ready on his lips, and then he knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't tell this man, standing over the body of his son, that that son had been shot down while changing brands. Disgrace would fall on Key Saw, on Grunow, on Cora—where did a man's loyalty to the brand lay?

"I say hold off, Jake," McGraw snapped, "until we know more."

Emmet Burse chose this moment to throw down the gauntlet.

"Hold off or draw, and be damned to you, Jake," he spat out. "I'm tired of your snivelin' palaver."

JAKE GRUNOW took the challenge like a slap in the face. His gun was half drawn, the room spreading out for action, when Cole launched himself to lock the gun hand. The big rancher struggled to free himself, and Cole tripped him, wrenching his weapon free, hurling it through the window to the alley. His voice held a cutting edge as he backed away, his own Colt out, threatening the room. The move caught them by surprise, Key Saw and Rocket alike. The slowly weaving gun muzzle held them rigid.

"Hold it," McGraw warned. "I'm still ramrodding Key Saw and my orders stick."

"You're fired," Jake howled from the floor. "Get out! If I see your face around here again I'll hang it from the nearest cottonwood."

"Damn," Barney Small said in a tight voice, "I believe he's sold out. Shall I take him, Jake?"

McGraw's blue-gray eyes met Barney's squarely. You couldn't take me, Barney, he thought, but damn your sawed-off frame, you'd try. Rocket stood poised and ready, held motionless for the moment by the sudden turn events had taken. In thinking of war with Key Saw, they had always thought first of McGraw. The six-foot Wyoming man was a nut that they knew would be hard to crack, and now he had intervened in their behalf. Now he was no longer on Key Saw's payroll.

Emmet Burse's blunt features held the look of an astonished bulldog. Frank Remere eyed McGraw with sardonic calculation, a hint of amusement behind his eyes. Artie Kerr was as he had always been, a thin shadow of a man, with a long nose below coal-black eyes, coiled speed, his gun for sale for wages. Bert Tolliver regarded McGraw with calm eyes, his graying chin whiskers moving rhythmically with the chewing of his cud. He bent his lanky frame carefully to spit.

"Better back off, Cole," he advised. "Better back off a heap, for my money."

McGraw was a fighting man, yet there was nothing here for him to throw his weight against. He backed, as Bert had advised. He moved back through the swinging doors, hearing the rise of angry voices within. He went down the street, a tall, wide-shouldered man, badly in need of a haircut, his roughly cut features set in

hopelessness, his gray eyes wearily thoughtful.

If Grunow knew, he thought, he wouldn't want to pay the bill for the truth. Talking wouldn't bring his son back, but it would bring him disgrace. Not talking might bring bloodshed between Rocket and Key Saw, but undoubtedly Rocket deserved what they might get, and Grunow had been champing on the bit to tackle them for months. There seemed to be nothing that he could do but keep his mouth shut and ride, leaving behind everything that he had fought for, the best job he'd ever had, the only woman he had ever asked to be his wife.

McGraw stood in the shadow of his horse before the mercantile, thinking about it. Curiosity nagged at him. Shooting Bass Grunow was something he had done, but *why* he'd had to shoot him was a horse of an entirely different color.

Bass could not get away with Key Saw beef, even ten or twenty head a month, by himself. There had to be others. He'd have no time or opportunity to run stock off over the shale rock and find an outlaw market for them. This fastened the crime on Rocket, for only Rocket could handle it in the Gray Butte area. Brands could be changed and crooked buyers could be found who would know that they had been changed, and would wink at the botched deception. The beef had to be passed from Bass to others. They had to be gathered and held somewhere, until enough were grouped to make driving north worth while.

Where had Smoke Desertell been today? As Frank Remere was a shadow to Burse, so was Desertell a shadow to both. And what had made young Grunow steal? The need must have been great. McGraw's resentment settled on Edda Savenough. McGraw was sure that she had created the need, the urge, that had prompted Bass to steal.

Jake Grunow swept by now, ribbons held high, craggy jaw set, with Bert and Barney beside him, headed west for headquarters. McGraw watched them until they were but a dust cloud in brown distance. He saw Burse mount his men and head east at the gallop. The two wolves of Gray Butte were heading to their dens to gather their fighting cubs. How long? An hour, maybe less, and they'd be back, for the challenge had been laid in Cantrell's saloon, and neither could back down now. A man could talk to one woman, say good-bye to another, ride a long piece in an hour. A man might get something to chew on as he rode.

McGray went up the steps of the hotel. The stairs leading up to the rooms above were musty with the dead odor of the years. The long hall was dark to his sun-squinted eyes. He almost bumped into her in the half darkness. At first he thought she was Cora Grunow, and then he was thinking of Edda Savenough again.

She stood before a half-opened door, a pile of clean sheets over her shapely arm. The odor of freshly laundered cloth reminded him of softly curtained rooms, of peace and of feminity, stirred him in spite of his preoccupation. The history of man is packed with tales of those who delayed their flight too long, beside an alluring woman.

"Hello, Cole," she said. "You'd walk over a body, wouldn't you, to get to Cora Grunow."

He looked soberly down at her, and then he smiled, lighting his face to boyishness.

"Perhaps," he said, "and then again, maybe not. There's only two good things in this world for a man, a gun and a woman. Any model will do if it's properly built and loaded."

She laughed, a low, throaty tinkle, as she moved into the room.

"I'll be fired," she said, "if I don't get this linen changed. Before Montana, Cole, I came from Missouri. I'm a woman that has to be shown."

IT WAS a challenge. A challenge as dangerous to McGraw as the muzzle of an aimed and cocked pistol. He heard movement down the hall, the slow opening of a door, and he stepped into the room with the girl, closing the door softly behind him.

"Change your sheets," he said. "I'll set and watch you."

Edda Savenough's cheeks were pink as she stripped the bed.

"You make up your mind quick, Cole," she said.

"Maybe," he told her. "You haven't got a man now, Edda. You're too damned pretty to be without one."

She halted in her work, her back pressed against the wall. McGraw saw the man-hunting urge rise within her. The fire of it flared her nostrils.

"Bass is dead," he said. "You know it by now, of course. You've still got Smoke Desertell, just like you have always had him. But Smoke doesn't count with me. Not like young Grunow did. I wouldn't be one to cut in on my boss' son, Edda. You know that."

Her slim, white hand fingered the diamond earrings that flashed at the sides of her head.

"I know about Bass," she said. "It's all over town. He was one to get it sooner or later. He was in love with me, Cole, and I'd have married him in the end."

She shrugged her shoulders, tossing her black hair from her dark eyes.

"What now, Cole?" she asked, seeking new ground under her. "You're not foreman of Key Saw any more, I hear. I wouldn't want a man without a good job."

"That's why you never cottoned too much to Desertell," he told her. "Smoke was a thirty-dollar-a-month hand. I'm wondering who bought you those diamond ear sparklers, Edda. Which one of the boys was out with you last night? Bass was stiffening when they brought him in—he couldn't have been shot much after daylight."

"That's none of your business, Cole," she teased, and her eyes became flirtatious.

McGraw got up and walked across the room, pressing her flat against the wall with the push of his body. And then he paused with listening. The thunder of hoofs came from the street below, dust rocketed up before the high windows. He heard the wild yell of Barney Small. Key Saw had moved faster than he had thought. It had been a short hour. Jake Grunow was back in town for the showdown.

The sound jarred him, brought its urgency. Key Saw was in and Rocket would not be far behind. McGraw asked himself what he was doing here, baiting this woman, when he should be riding, putting distance between himself and Gray Butte. If he became mixed in this fight now, both Rocket and Key Saw would try to shoot him down. But curiosity nagged. What devilish spell could this black-eyed vixen weave that would drive Jake Grunow's son to steal? What did she know that she might tell him? The thought brought quick anger to Cole. He brought his arm strongly across her throat, forcing her head back against the wall. She looked at him with still eyes, asking him what manner of man he was, what purpose he had in mind. The man wisdom in her did not permit fear to rise.

"Which one was with you last night?" he repeated the question. "What did you demand of Bass? Answer me, Edda, or I'll break your neck against the wall."

She saw the hardness in him then, the ruthless, driving force that had made him the top man of Key Saw in the two short years since he had come north from Wyoming, and she gave in to it.

"Desertell was with me until midnight," she gasped. "Smoke wanted one of Sioux Charlie's hand-woven wool shirts. Charlie haggled; Smoke had to give him three dollars and his old shirt. It was late when we got back."

"Bass?" his voice was sharp.

"Bass was waiting for me here. He was very angry. They would have fought if I hadn't stopped them. I sent Smoke away. Bass left a couple hours before daylight."

McGraw's shoulders sagged. That was all there was to it. Two woman-hungry punchers, courting the same woman on the same night. One got sent home early, because he drew only thirty dollars and found. The other stayed late, because he was Jake Grunow's son.

One rode home safely, the other stopped along the way to pick up a few dollars in rustled beef, to buy his girl a posey, and he died. He got slung over a horse and packed in, with blood on the back of his shirt where the bullet had came out. Cora Grunow's brother. He turned away from Edda without looking back. As he closed the door to the room he saw Cora Grunow watching him from the hall.

Her eyes told him that she knew that Edda had been in there with him. There was sorrow for her brother in her face and contempt for McGraw. Everything in her that had once reached out to him seemed to be gone. He moved toward her, seeing the angry words form, stopping them with an aupraised hand.

"Don't say it, Cora," he said. "I'm riding out now. I'd rather leave it lay as it is. It will be better for us both."

He started to turn away, and then again he cocked his head with listening. The fast, rolling beat of many hooves was approaching town from the east. Rocket was coming in. The time in which he had to ride was very short.

"You can't ride now, Cole," she said. "They'll be fighting like mad beasts down there. Key Saw will need you."

He knew what lay in her mind, and he shrugged it off. Loyalty to the brand didn't hold after a man was fired . . . or did it?

"The hell I can't," he said. "I don't work for Key Saw any more."

"I'll not believe that of you, Cole," she said, and something in her voice made him look back as he walked down the stairs.

HE MOVED out on the boardwalk, a slow, bitter resentment building in him. The deal was a trap, a net in which a man struggled helplessly. He saw Key Saw horses packed at the rail before Cantrell's saloon. The brand on Bert's strawberry roan stood out starkly in white hair, and it seemed an old and familiar friend. Jake has gathered the whole works, he thought. When he buries his son he plans to bury Rocket with him.

Rocket milled in front of the mercantile, their eyes fastened on Cantrell's saloon. Jake was holed up there and Emmet didn't quite know what to do about it. They all wore guns; Winchesters were snugged beneath stirrup skirts. Desertell wasn't among them, and once again his absence from the scene bothered McCraw. He thought of the days and the long nights that he had prowled, from Little Cedar to the Little Missouri, trying to gather evidence against these men. Guilty or not, the showdown was here now, and he was not to be part of it. He had become too entangled in his own loop, too uncertain of where his duty lay. These two factions would fight, as it had always seemed certain that they would fight. What matter if they fought over false evidence or true? Frank Remere's voice reached out to taunt McGraw.

"Lucky you got fired, Cole," he called. "It would have been a pleasure to see the insides of your guts."

McGraw's foot was in his stirrup, his hand on the horn. He paused, teetering there, turning his head, his cold eyes moving over the Rocket ramrod. Remere was dressed as though for a grand occasion, new Stetson, gaudy neckerchief, gray, hand on the horn. He paused, teetering attention, and he thought again of Edda and Smoke, riding half the night to Sioux Charlie's tepee—a hell of a way to court. And then he thought of how Rocket hands treasured these shirts. Charlie made few,

and he refused to sell to Key Saw, for Grunow had sorely injured the halfbreed's pride in years gone by. Such shirts were almost a trade mark of Rocket riders.

"Where's Desertell, Remere?" he shot the question at Frank. "You'll need him before you're through with this."

"You worry too much about Rocket." Remere's voice was edged with sarcasm. "Maybe I'd better put you on the payroll, McGraw. I sent him to Desert City two days back."

Remere lied. Edda Savenough had told him nothing that mattered, but she had not been lying when she had said that Desertell had been with her until midnight, buying a hand-woven shirt, the badge of a Rocket hand. There was something about these shirts that nagged at McGraws mind. Bass Grunow had blood on the back of his shirt as he was carired down the street, black blood against a blue shirt—blue denim.

A man looks down the sights of a Winchester at a galloping figure, with smoke and dawn haze low over the ridges. He shoots and his man goes down. He circles around, slow and cautious, fearing that his victim may be laying doggo with a cocked gun in his fist. Or maybe he has a confederate or two hidden in the brush. Finally he comes down to look. He sees the son of his own spread sprawled in his blood in the brush. Such a thing shakes a man to the foundation of his soul. He doesn't think of shirts, or their color.

But now, looking at Remere's garment, he knew with certainty that the man at whom he had shot that morning was wearing such a shirt—Bass Grunow's had been blue, not the gray coloring of Sioux Charlie's natural wool. Smoke Desertell was mysteriously missing, and Remere had lied about his whereabouts. Smoke was wearing a gray shirt last night.

"I've had my cutter oiled and loaded for you for a long time, Remere," McGraw said, his back against his horse. "I'd admire to see you draw."

The challenge took Remere by surprise, brought a flickering to his eyes. McGraw could sense the shifting of the Rocket crew, their nerves strung tight by impending action. McGraw limbered his arm, and it seemed good to be standing ready to fight. It was better than riding away. It wasn't all clear yet, but it didn't matter any more. A man saw the ragged, wavering trail of mist, hanging low, sweeping the ground, from a black thunderhead on a distant ridge. He knew that it rained there, even though the drops did not strike his face.

"There's no reason for the others to fight, Remere," he said flatly. "There's been rustling done on Key Saw, and in some way you're the man behind it. You and me have got a private war. You'll stand alone, Frank, because Desertell isn't here to back you. I have a hunch that I shot him down in Little Cedar this morning."

He had shot a man wearing a gray shirt, while the shirt of young Grunow was blue. Desertell was missing—in some obscure way it added up.

Remere pivoted his horse, seeking an advantageous position. He was going to draw—McGraw could see the signs gathering in his body. He took two long, slow strides nearer. Remere eyed him coldly.

"You killed a man this morning, Cole," he said, holding his voice too low for others to hear, "but you don't dare tell who it was. You haven't told Grunow—why?"

"If you know that much," McGraw said, "you're guilty as hell. You and Desertell did Bass in, when he caught you branding Key Saw cows."

"That's a lie!" Remere barked, and his hand went down.

McGRAW was near now. He launched himself like an uncoiling spring, grasping the gaudy neckerchief, twisting it, hauling Remere from his hull, gripping his gun wrist as he fell. The cocked hammer buried its firing pin in McGraw's thumb. Cole twisted the arm behind Re-

mere's back, pistoning his knee into Remere's belly. The Rocket man doubled forward, and McGraw locked him in tight embrace, grunting with the power he brought to bear on the gun wrist. The Colt dropped.

McGraw shook himself free, and then he drove into Remere with a blow that started from his heels. The smash set Remere back. He tripped over the boardwalk, crashed into the mercantile wall. He came away, with spring in his body, his features set in fighting fury. But McGraw was there, heaving into him with punches that lashed at him, knowing that Rocket would not interfere as long as the battle lay between one man and another, with fists. Their curiosity as to who was the best man would hold them.

Remere was hurt, his features a bloody mask. He tried to weave aside, but McGraw gathered in the neckerchief, pulling Frank into the punch that whacked solidly against his jaw, and he went down.

Cole heard Barney Small's thin, high voice, shouting urgent warning. He whirled, drawing on the turn, to fire at Artie Kerr, who was moving in to Remere's aid. It was a hasty shot, poorly directed. It tugged at the Rocket gunslick's shirt, leaving the cloth frayed at the shoulder. Kerr brought his weapon up with a smooth, underhanded roll. Cole threw himself flat, and the slug passed high. He fired upward from the ground, and Kerr sat down as though slapped across the chest with a walking beam. He sat in the dust, a thin, crooked-faced man with a look of surprise in his eyes. For the first time since McGraw had known Artie Kerr, he looked directly at him, without his lids half cocked down. Kerr was looking wide-eyed into hell. He slowly leaned over until his head lay in the dust.

Key Saw poured out of Cantrell's and Rocket took to the shelter of the mercantile in a wild scramble of horses and men. McGraw jumped into the middle of the street and his voice rang high above the din.

"Hold it!" he roared. "This fight is over."

The act halted fingers that were tightening on triggers. Grunow's voice came from behind the watering trough before the saloon.

"Get out of line of fire, you idiot," he barked. "I'm beginning to think you're loco, Cole."

"If he moves from where he stands," Emmet Burse drawled from his hiding place under the mercantile porch, "he's a dead pigeon. If you've got anything to say, McGraw, spill it. I give you two seconds."

"Where's Desertell, Burse?" Cole called. "You're shy one man."

"I've got enough," the voice of Burse was grim. "Frank sent him to Desert City."

"I sent him to hell this morning," McGraw told him flatly. "He had a Key Saw cow down beside a branding fire in Little Cedar. Frank and Smoke got Bass —I got there a little too late."

It was a bluff, but it brought Emmet to his feet, a cocked gun in his big fist.

"That's a lie, Cole."

"I shot a man," McGraw said wearily, "wearing a gray shirt. Bass Grunow's was blue. Where's Desertell?"

"You shot a man," Burse's voice was incredulous, "and argue about who it was? Don't you know?"

"It was at long range," McGraw began. "I—"

Jake Grunow bellowed as he came into the street. The big Key Saw owner stalked forward like a lumbering bear, his Colt dangling at full cock from a limber wrist.

"Crawl out and pick up your iron, Remere," Grunow called. "I'm going to splatter you all over town."

Remere backed away, naked fear shining in his colorless eyes. Riding high and unhurt, the Rocket ramrod might have faced a man like Grunow. But now courage was drained from him.

"Desertell shot Bass," he whimpered. "I didn't have a thing to do with it—I swear it. We took a few cows—not enough to hurt anyone. That damned skirt of Desertell's always hankered after something. After McGraw got Smoke, I switched the bodies while he was circling around for a look. It was only a joke."

Contempt came over Grunow's bulldog features. He took one long, lunging stride forward, swinging the barrel of his Colt up and down. It thudded on Remere's skull, cutting a long gash in his cheek as it spent its force. The Rocket ramrod dropped as though he'd been pole-axed.

A gusty outletting of breath came from Emmet Burse as he came forward. "What goes on here, Grunow?" he demanded. "Rocket never rustled a head of Key Saw beef in its life."

"Perhaps not," McGraw told him, "but Remere and Desertell did."

GRUNOW looked at Burse, weighing him, guarding him, and then his eyes were questioning McGraw.

"Bass was down when I arrived," McGraw explained, "but I didn't know it then. When I toppled Desertell into the brush at long range, I was out of sight of the spot for some time as I worked in close. Remere switched bodies on me. It had me puzzled for a while."

A bewildered look came to Grunow's face.

"Hell of a mess," he said. "It took you a long time to talk, Cole."

"When a man thinks he's killed your son, Jake, it rattles him some. Took me a long time to get around to remembering about the shirts. Maybe I'm some color blind."

He walked toward the hotel, leaving the two fighting lobos of Gray Butte standing between men who had lost the urge to fight. It was a good thing, but it had been close. Not half so close, McGraw thought, as explaining to Cora about Edda Savenough would be.

Still, it might not be as hard a job as he imagined. That last look she had given him as he went down the stairs meant something to him now. She had held faith in him. She had known that he wasn't going to ride out—he was going down to the street to fight for the brand.

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THE REFORMATION

By
KIRK
DUNSTAN

THERE may have been wider-open and meaner trail towns than Smoky Crossing, but if so, very few cattle drovers knew about them. And it was Dutch Frank's boast that if any stray waddie got past his brand of firewater, escaped the crooked games and the painted lure of the sirens in his Last Chance, he'd get 'em in court, sure as shootin', the following morning.

Dutch Frank owned Smoky Crossing—lock, stock and barrel—and his sawed-off shotgun court, at which he presided as justice of the peace, was notorious for its heavy fines for light offenses.

Now, of a May evening, he stood at the doorway of his barroom and frowned as a thin, gangling figure in rusty black approached from down the street. The Reverend Pembroke Carter was, definitely, a fly in Dutch Frank's ointment. And it was time that something be done about it, he figured.

Although the small church boasted a regular congregation of scarcely a half dozen people—mostly womenfolk—Dutch Frank looked upon it as a bad influence for his particular business.

Already he had given the minister word that he'd have to go. Up till sundown on Sunday he could leave in peace. Later than that—well, the sky-pilot's funeral procession might be peaceful, too.

The gambler flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his immaculate broadcloth and his fingers drummed lightly on the ivory butts of the two Smith and Wessons at his hips. Bible-shouters were certainly a nuisance.

Sunday morning. The town, bathed in sunlight, was outwardly quiet, peaceful. Five men had gone out in gunsmoke before daylight. Others, drink-sodden, groaned in jail, or lay in the gutters.

Wearily, Pembroke Carter made his way over to the church and climbed to the little belfry. As the echoes died, a little group of three women started to the unpainted church house. A little later a couple of others sauntered in.

Reverend Carter began the service—his last service, he knew—his bony knees pumping on the wheezy little organ, his tired voice chanting.

> Onward Christian Soldiers,
> Marching as to War . . .

He was not quite through the sermon when the door creaked open. Dutch Frank, swaying slightly, stood in the doorway, his wide-brimmed beaver pushed back on his head, his fat red face leering. A cigar stub was in one corner of his mouth. Hands in pockets, he slouched arrogantly down the aisle.

"Go right ahead, Preacher. Don't mind me. Just thought I'd get me a good laugh to start out the day right."

Pemboke Carter stopped in mid-sentence. His eyes bored into the stout figure before him. The half dozen people shifted nervously on the hard benches. The minis-

OF SMOKY CROSSING

The Reverend Pembroke Carter lost a battle with himself that day—and won a congregation.

ter's head was bowed; his lips moved as in prayer. Then he raised his eyes and stared again into those of Dutch Frank.

"You have come at last, Dutch Frank. You may stay. But take off your hat and take that cigar from your mouth!"

The boss of Smoky Crossing laughed thickly. "You need some life to this show, mister," he said. "Let's have a dance!" And even as he spoke his two guns were in his fists.

The left-hand gun spat. Lead ripped into the bare chancel floor. A woman screamed and fainted. Another slug tore a piece of leather from the minister's heel.

"Dance, damn you!" roared Dutch Frank.

There was nothing else to do. Carter's long legs moved; his knees wobbled, and his feet shuffled desperately. Dutch Frank roared with delight. Carter, his face frozen white, thought of just one thing then. Ten bullets—five in each gun. Now there were only six left. Now three. . . . He danced on. . . .

Dutch Frank's fat paunch shook. This was more fun than he'd expected. And yet, the expression on the minister's face was something he had never seen before. Almost like the expression of a man walking in his sleep. And as the last shot echoed, Carter hurled himself from the chancel and grappled with the saloonman.

One hand grabbed the collar of his coat; the other clutched a generous portion of trouser seat. Dutch Frank, taken completely by surprise, was rushed helplessly along the aisle and out into the bright Sunday morning.

Madness blazed from the minister's eyes. He worked like an automaton, instinctively, without thinking. His very frenzy for a moment startled the two-gun boss. His long fingers grabbed the two guns, threw them in a high arc twenty feet away into the sage.

Then, calmly, the minister pointed one stiffened finger to his own cheek. "Hit me there," he said.

Without thinking, Dutch Frank slapped the minister vigorously.

"And there." The Reverend Carter's voice was low, vibrant as a taut wire as he pointed to the other cheek. *Slap*. The minister smiled, and that smile was not pleasant to see.

"Oh Lord, I have turned the other cheek. And now—"

Dutch Frank never knew what hit him. His head popped back, the elegant beaver hat fell to the ground. It seemed as if the air were alive with smashing, pounding fists. The Reverend Carter waded in, with all the joy of battle denied him for five long, repressed years. Once he got into the way of Frank's right fist, but it is doubtful if he felt the blow. Long arms pistoning, his mallet-like hands pummeled and thudded into flesh. . . .

The gambler was a fading spot in the distance when the Reverend Carter shook

(Continued on page 113)

They thundered down a side street, firing back at the reckless Dave Tatum. . . .

THE QUICK-TRIGGER TUMBLEWEED

CHAPTER ONE

Gunslicks' Rendezvous

'BRASKY PASCO had heard the reports, so now on his way to Carrizo City to rejoin his boys, he took a side trip to Pintados. It was one of many near-forgotten towns in his past. Typically Southwestern, adobe and frame, dust and sun. But not placid.

As he rode down the street in the glare of midday, a long-forked figure on an evil-faced buckskin horse, Pasco felt the undercurrents suck around him. Looking neither right nor left, he still observed details. The smoky gelding, despite signs of travel, was capable of prancing in a sort of singlefoot

By PAUL C. PEIL

Smashing Range-War Novelette

"The Queen," they called that cold-eyed hellcat who bossed roaring Pintados. Which, 'Brasky Paso figured, left a job of King open for the right man—a certain quick-gun gent from Nebraska!

style—walking behind while bouncing each front hoof off the ground, gently swaying 'Brasky sidewise.

There was a bit of showoff in that pair, plus a lot of self-confidence. To the coyotes and wolves already assembled in Pintados, it was a notice that the boss lobo himself had arrived. A little tardy perhaps, but in time for any feast.

At the far end of the street, he turned into the double-doored stable, ordered the buckskin walked, rubbed down, grained. Then, with saddle-roll under an arm, Winchester carbine in a hand, he returned upstreet to the Valley Hotel. The clerk eyed him dubiously as he signed the dog-eared register and paid in advance. He checked the .44-40, dropped the roll on the desk, and asked, "What's the best feed trough in town?"

The clerk named the Yucca Café. 'Brasky recrossed the shabby lobby and emerged on the boardwalk just as two men stepped onto it from the street. They halted, abruptly staring, and he knew they had been seeking him out, yet having found him now, were unsure what to do with him.

One wore a sheriff's badge, the other a deputy's. And 'Brasky, studying them in the snap-quick manner he'd developed over a span of smoky years, thought: For star-toters they're about as ridiculous a pair as I've ever seen. No wonder this territory has broken out with a gun-rash....

THE DEPUTY was unkempt, rail-thin, in his forties. His eyes, straw-colored like his wispy hair, fidgeted under 'Brasky's stare.

The sheriff was average in build, though muscular in shoulder and thigh. He wore neat pin-stripe trousers tucked into plain boots, and a four-in-hand with his shirt. His features were frank, level enough, but he was a mere stripling—a scared stripling right now! 'Brasky doubted that he'd voted yet. What a lawman for this ring-tailed range!

"You're 'Brasky Pasco, aren't you?" He had a firm, resonant voice, its inflection reminding 'Brasky of someone. When the tall gunslick neither denied nor affirmed his question, he went on. "I . . . That is, as sheriff of Pintados County, I'm asking why you're here."

Pasco almost snorted. "Why, Sheriff"—he stressed the title—"I didn't see any sign warnin' me to stay out. Do I need a passport or an invitation?"

The other's gaze wavered as he said, "No, only—it's this!" Now his gaze steadied again. "We've got too many of your kind here already."

'Brasky frowned. Maybe the man wasn't exactly scared, just uncertain and inexperienced, fumbling through a bad situation. He shook his head. "None of my kind, buster. Some smaller-caliber gents, yes." Men were drifting up, brazenly standing around in earshot. He swiveled his glance over them. "You got plenty of has-beens an' would-bes. Which in turn makes me ask you: Why don't you start with them? To reach the top of a ladder, you got to climb up."

The youth reddened visibly, his silence awkward. From a nearby group came a snicker and a voice. "Thet's a good question. Answer him, Davey."

'Brasky looked at the speaker, recognizing him as Utah Grimes, a pock-faced, two-spot brand artist who'd spent more time inside various pens than he had outside. Enjoying the sheriff's discomfiture, Utah winked approvingly at Pasco. In that moment 'Brasky felt his initial sympathy for this kid, Davey. A lone-wolfer at heart, he always leaned to the under dog.

Davey seemed to possess a single-track mind. He asked, "Did the Queen send for you, Pasco?"

"The Queen? If she did, I never got the message."

Davey blurted, "Was it Bible Barnes then?"

"You're a persistent galoot, Sheriff! No,

Barnes didn't send for me either. Nobody sent for me."

That stumped Davey momentarily, and once more Grimes snickered, injecting his comment. "Yes, sir, li'l Davey is really grillin' thet Pasco jasper. Boys, we orta be proud of Davey—mebbe run him fer gov'nor. Yes, sir, Gov'nor Tatum'd give 'em both barrels."

Pasco peered sharply at Davey, mentally recasting him in another mold. "You any kin to Texas Tom Tatum?"

Davey said absently, "My father," and then he was switching back onto the old track: "Hell, Pasco, you're bound to be on one side or the other!"

It was beginning to wear thin with Pasco now. He was thinking of old Tom, wondering if ever he'd been raw and callow like this son of his. For the sake of the situation, he stretched the truth, saying, "Not necessarily, Dave. I'm a travelin' man, takin' a stopover. Ask the clerk inside; I paid for one day's lodgin'." Hitching at his double-looped busky belt, he moved sidewise to leave. "Shucks, don't fret about me. I'm just a mugwump."

"Mugwump?" Dave repeated. "What's that?"

"Damn!" Pasco muttered. This kid was a cockleburr. "You don't know what a mugwump is? It's a bird what sits on a fence, its mug hangin' over one side, its wump over the other. See you later, Sheriff."

As he approached Grimes, the cow thief was guffawing and cuffing his companion. He paused before Grimes, who cried, "Thet was a lulu, Pasco."

'Brasky asked softly, "Was it?"

Grimes stared at him, round-eyed, and his levity departed, and a sullen meanness crept into his eyes. "No—no, I don't reckon it was, Pasco."

'Brasky walked away, tall, balanced, ready, his hands brushing the bone handles of the Cavalry Colts in his cutaway holsters....

WHILE he waited for his meal at the Yucca Café, he washed up at a pump behind the kitchen. Then, sitting slack at a plank table in a corner, he sipped at black coffee until his steak and spuds were served. As he ate, he thought of Sheriff Tom Tatum who had kept this bailiwick a sterling example of law and order for over a decade.

When he'd heard of Tom's death six months ago—accidental, according to report—he'd figured there were few men who could fill the lawman's boots. A combination of efficiency and tolerant tact was rare. Old Tom's son lacked it. The influx of hardcases here proved that. He wondered, too, if Dave . . . Well, a corrupt officer could line his pockets by stringing along in a ripe setup.

The café was fairly well filled, customers coming and going. He watched them all, aware that some of their surly attitudes were due to his presence. He was a whit surprised when he saw Bone Salinas enter, but went on eating, just shifting his fork to his left hand to keep his right hand free. It rested idly at the edge of the table. For he hadn't heard that Salinas was hereabouts.

Salinas was a big, heavy-set man in proud finery. His cream Stetson was canted on black, bushy hair. His skin was sunburned almost black. Having taken a moment to locate Pasco, he moved toward him, and he was so bench-legged that his fancy silver spurs dragged with every step. A lesser gunman had laughed at that walk of Salinas' once, and died.

He halted at 'Brasky's table and for a space, while sounds flowed out of the room like a tide, they studied each other. Salinas didn't speak; Pasco worked his jaws in mastication. Hostility lay between them, and something else that stung Salinas now. He knew that Pasco was remembering two years ago when, after a range war that had them on opposing sides, he, Salinas, had run like a dog, tail between legs.

"You're blockin' my view of the door, Salinas," 'Brasky said. "Move on or sit down."

Salinas sat down. His eyes, startlingly jade green in his dark face, measured Pasco. He said, "I'll give you a message, Pasco. From the Queen. You're wasting your time here, casing this layout. You can't crowd in on it. It's ours."

"Ours?" He forked onions and meat into his mouth. "I been hearin' about this Queen. Must be some female—Cattle Annie, Belle Starr, Calamity Jane, all rolled into one. How do you fit in?"

"We're pardners."

"I see. She's the brains, you're the flunky, deliverin' her messages an' so forth. That's all right, if it pays good." He grinned at Salinas. "I just never liked split deals. Take over or nothin', that's me. Therefore, I might as well ride out?"

Salinas nodded warily. Anger had drawn hollows into his cheeks and slitted his eyelids. "That's right, Pasco."

He was a cold-blood, 'Brasky knew, without underestimating him. He had gray hair sprinkled about his temples, had lasted longer than most gun-throwers. Being a cold-blood was his weakness. Get him hot and he rattled. In this game the little things counted, and 'Brasky capitalized on them.

Pasco shrugged. "Then this other fellow—what's his name, Barnes?—maybe I could take over there."

Clawing at a gun, Salinas came out of his chair. Or tried to. With his right hand, 'Brasky tipped the table, threw it into him, crashing him and the chair floorward under it. Instantly the café was bedlam, men scrambling from stools, other tables. A waitress screamed.

"Hold on, folks," 'Brasky cried. "I allus was clumsy gettin' up from a table." He came around, stooping beside Salinas, untangling him from the red-checkered cloth and dishes. The man was a mess, gravy-splattered; a skein of cooked onions hung from an ear. He helped Salinas stand, saying, "I'm sorry, Bone. C'mon, I'll walk with you as far as the hotel."

Salinas wiped his face on a napkin. His rage and humiliation were palpable vibrations filling the room as he glared at Pasco. At last, clapping on his hat, he walked ahead of the taller gunman toward the door.

At the cash register, 'Brasky exclaimed, "Shucks, Bone, my money's in my other pants. Pay the man four bits for me, will you?"

* * *

As they went down the street, Pintados looking on in wonderment, 'Brasky told Bone, "You're lucky, Salinas. That hash-slinger saved your bacon. She moved up behind you, in my line of fire. These centerfire slugs of mine plow right through a person sometimes. I couldn't risk hittin' her."

Salinas was mute until they came abreast the hotel entrance. Then he said, "Better think it over, Pasco. We're in the saddle; we'll ride you down!"

He clumped off, rowels dragging. When he was several yards away, Pasco called after him, "Bone!" He turned slightly, and 'Brasky asked, "Which direction is that Barnes place?"

Bone's green eyes glittered in the sunlight like sharp glass....

Upstairs in his room later, with a chair-back jammed under its doorknob, Pasco sat on the edge of his bed for the length of a smoke. Not bothered about Salinas, no new enemy, he wasn't sure he'd buy chips in this game. However he'd heard it was high stakes, and it was foolish to overlook anything, so he aimed to see what cards Barnes held.

Not to be denied the luxury of a mattress, he rolled it off the bed onto the floor in a far corner. It made him less of a target should bullets riddle these cardboard walls. He was saddle-fagged, wanted about five

hours of sleep before he set out again. He slept that long....

CHAPTER TWO

Man of Peace

AT SUNDOWN 'Brasky came to the Barnes ranch in the valley. Behind him, in the piñon-studded hills, half a dozen Salinas gun-toadies were now engaged in chasing their tails. They hadn't jumped him in town when he appeared at dusk, saddling his horse and riding out. They knew his destination—but they didn't know him. They got no whack at him on the road, for he circled, quartered and twisted, losing them in short order.

The ranch house was pueblo style, long and low, with jutting *viga* ends. Several rooms were lighted, and the aroma of burning cedar tickled Pasco's nose as he walked his gelding past corrals into the front yard. Here he reined up, momentarily touched and held by the peaceful scene.

The solid, warm house gave forth an invitation. There was the low of bedded cows in the unseen background, the whinny of horses nearby, the cry of a nightbird overhead. The spring smells of earth were all around. The tan hound, yonder in a patch of light, wagged a tail instead of baying. It was a setting that Pasco, the tumbleweed, often envisioned in lonely camps.

He jerked around in leather when a voice said, "Evening, stranger."

The man who came from corral shadows toward him was small, easy of manner. 'Brasky, capable of sensing things in people, their good or evil, perfidy or trust, could feel this man's inherent friendliness. He said, "Howdy. I'm lookin' for Mr. Barnes."

Reaching his off-side stirrup, the man extended a palm upward. "Me."

Shaking the hand, 'Brasky found himself carefully selecting words. "I hear you're needin' help."

Moving around Smoky's head to the other side, Barnes now had 'Brasky's features in better light. "I always need hands. Men come and go; little stability in them nowadays. Few like a steady diet of honest work when they can beat wages by gambling, or nibbling on my herds. Brands mean nothing to the Army posts and mining camps hereabouts."

Pasco glanced up when a shaft of lamplight spilled across him. A door had opened, and a girl stood limned in it, staring out at them. He blinked once from the light, once from her shapely silhouette. She was small, like Barnes, slender and full of curves. He couldn't determine the color of her hair, but it glowed, and he had to pull his gaze from her.

Barnes was saying, in an altered tone, "I have a full crew at present. You're welcome to have supper at the cookshack and spend the night in the bunkhouse. Now excuse me; I have a guest."

He stood a moment longer, his eyes still fixed on the Colts at 'Brasky's hips; when at last he raised them to again study Brasky's face, the latter felt their hard impact. Then Barnes turned toward the open door.

'Brasky understood: no gunmen were wanted here!

AT THE flutter of hoofbeats, they both turned, peering into the gloom. A horse came thudding into the yard. Its rider was bareheaded and swaying in saddle as he reined into a jolting, stiff-legged halt. Seeing neither Barnes nor 'Brasky, he tried to dismount, but hung up with a leg over the animal's croup. As he clung tiltingly, Pasco jumped Smoky alongside, clutched him under the arms.

Barnes came thrusting between the horses, and Pasco eased the man down to him. "What's happened, Davis?"

'Brasky, a hand sticky with blood, said curtly, "He's been shot. Let me get him inside."

The girl was gone from the doorway as he carried Davis into the large living room, placing him on a plush divan. Before he got Davis' shirt unbuttoned, she had returned with a basin of water and cloths Working over the semi-conscious man, 'Brasky seemed oblivious to everything else, but he wasn't. He wondered what that lank, shifty-eyed deputy sheriff was doing here; if this pretty girl always was so efficient. He heard the two horsemen arrive, and when they entered gave them a summary stare, then ignored them.

A little later, finished, he reported. "He's okay. That wing wound is clean. The scalp crease has him foggy. Nothin' worse."

Davis said weakly, "Jumped me at Rock Creek—three men. I got away in the brush. Don't know why they done it. I ain't stood up to 'em, not with 'em threatenin' the wife an' kids! Got a drink, Barnes?"

"Sweet cider, neighbor. No strong stuff."

Those Salinas yahoos, Pasco concluded, had mistaken Davis for him. He rolled a quirly, watching the deputy talk low with the girl—whose hair was a smoky brown, like the *vigas* against the calcimined ceiling. She glanced at him once, averting her eyes when they met his. He listened to one of the late arrivals, a blunt-bodied man in sweaty duckin's, wearing a gun high on his hip.

"Riggs and Moses will be along soon, Barnes. I tell you, we got to act together in this! We're gettin' nowhere, each on his lonesome. We—"

"You know my view of the affair, Mark. It hasn't changed."

"Darn it, Bible! Did you know they squatted the Beargrass today, and Gumbo Wells?" When Barnes frowned, he said, "I didn't think so! My grass, your water. They've about dried you up, yet you mush-mouth and turn-the-other-cheek to them! My two-bit outfit's not much—you could lose it, and all of our holdings, for that matter, in a corner of your range—but I'm going to fight for every damned inch of it!"

His gray head bent, hands clasped behind him, Barnes took a turn about the Navajo rug. "Be patient, neighbors. Don't start a wholesale range war. The confused issues will be cleared up shortly. I gave Agent Miles my patents and land certificates today. He takes them to the Capitol tomorrow."

Silent until now, the second man croaked, "You're crazier than some ginned-up Injun! You think he'll get there?"

"I do. The sheriff is going with him."

"That bug-eyed kid? Why...Let's wait and see!"

The deputy growled, "Looky here, Jed."

Barnes silenced him with a gesture. As he smilingly faced the two cowmen, he seemed old, tired, yet somehow indomitable. It was a stature of spirit, not his small frame. "I'm not a fighting man, friends. I've pioneered more by peace than I ever could have by violence. I've had badmen threaten me, rustlers sink teeth in my herds, crooks fleece me. But I'm here; they're gone. Maybe my ranch isn't as large as it might've been, if I'd hired an army of shell-burners. Then again, maybe it's larger. I'm satisfied with it."

'Brasky ground his cigarette butt in a sand vessel. He was remembering four years ago—maybe it was five—when he and his boys had come in here, eager to try their luck against Barnes' easy-pickings kingdom. There had been one obstacle, one stumbling block.

When he spoke, he drew all eyes upon him. "Hasn't it occurred to you, Mr. Barnes, that there was a simon-pure, catawumpus star-packer, Tom Tatum by name, who kept the flies off your back? He's also gone now."

IT WAS the girl who answered, not Barnes. She came closer, facing Pasco, and her scorn was like flame, flashing from her eyes, crisping her words. She said, "Sheriff Tom may be dead, but a Tatum

still wears the law boots. Maybe they're new on him, pinching and squeaky, but he'll break them in. Dave Tatum is his father's son!"

With a faint smile, one brow lifted, Pasco waited for her to run down.

She kept on. "Stand and sneer at us, Mr. 'Brasky Pasco." She flung the name at him, "We're not your kind, are we? Well, in my opinion you're just an over-rated gun-bum, so don't try to peddle your wares here. And whatever you think of my father, he's no coward. He has the faith of his convictions! Can you say as much?"

Pasco tugged his slouch hat forward on his head. "I reckon, miss, all I can say is good night." He bowed mockingly to her and left the room.

He had swung into saddle when the two-bit rancher, Mark, called after him and trailed over. The man began, "I got a proposition—"

'Brasky no longer masked his ruffled feelings. "Don't waste my time, mister. That girl was wrong. I'm a business man, not a bum. An' I'm afraid my price tag's too steep for you. Sorry."

He wheeled the gelding, jabbed in a hook and loped from the yard.

All the way into town, something pricked at him. The rebukes of self-righteous people never bothered him; he'd found they usually swallowed a camel and gagged on a gnat. As for the girl, he placed women and trouble in the same category, neither hunting nor avoiding either. She was a high-spirited filly who would give someone —he'd wager it was Dave Tatum—a hard time. No, it was something else, too vague, that disturbed him.

The county courthouse was a single-storied square of sandstone at the upper end of the main street. At this hour, nine o'clock, he hadn't expected to see the light in its corridor and an office. Reining up, he dismounted, climbing the stone steps.

The land agent, Miles, might be around. He was 'Brasky's next angle. Just because the Queen didn't want him, and Barnes couldn't use him, 'Brasky wasn't calling it quits. Those papers in Miles' possession had some key bearing. Maybe he and Miles....

He was disappointed. There was only a janitor cleaning up, an ancient Mexican who knew not where the Señor Miles lived.

At the barn, after warning the night hostler to beware of Smoky's left hind leg, 'Brasky took his carbine and strode along the street. Passing through the patches of light and darkness, he carried the .44-40 with its stock tucked under an armpit, barrel down-tilted. He could, if need be, operate it as efficiently as a hand gun. The town was wide awake, however, with few people outdoors. They were in the numerous bars, of which the double-decked Blue Moon was the largest and noisiest.

The same clerk, rather sleepy-eyed, was on duty at the hotel. He gave Pasco a letter along with his room key. "She waited several hours for you, Mr. Pasco. In your room. I hope it was all right. I...you see, it doesn't pay to make her mad."

"Who the hell you talkin' about?"

"Why, the Queen."

Frowning, 'Brasky slit the envelope, removed a sheet of scented stationery, and read:

> I'm dealing this game, you stubborn clabber-brain, and I don't give invitations to have them snubbed. You've taken your ride, now you better come over and see me like a man. Or else.

'Brasky reread the bold handwriting and grinned crookedly. Clabber-brain? He went behind the desk, stood the Winchester in a corner. As he paused before a cloudy mirror on the wall, brushing caliche dust from his shirt and slipping his dot-kerchief under his collar, tie fashion, he asked, "Where does this Queen jane hang out?"

"She runs the Blue Moon."

'Brasky nodded. Crossing the lobby, he hefted the double holsters more comfortably on his hips....

CHAPTER THREE

No Holds Barred

THE BLUE MOON was a gold mine. Faro, chuckaluck, roulette. An expensive hardwood bar; the glitter of a cut-glass chandelier. Beneath the footlights of a small stage a Mex trio sobbed soft string music over the hall. And wonder of wonders, the B-girls were young, attractive. Here was class.

'Brasky stood along a wall, studying the place and its patrons. Then, lighting a panetella, he skirted the dance floor and reached the staircase that led to a balcony. Here he halted, momentarily matching the stare of Bone Salinas who, standing with Utah Grimes at the bar end, had just noticed him. Bone muttered something to Utah, the latter jerking his head toward Pasco, his eyes wide with surprise.

'Brasky grinned and wagged a forefinger at him in the cavalry sign of "Maggie's drawers," meaning no hit. Utah understood the taunt, his face twisting and a hand hovering briefly over a Colt handle before he turned back to the counter. Poker faced, Salinas watched 'Brasky mount the stairs.

There was a door marked "Private—Knock. This Means You." 'Brasky was in the act, with knuckles lifted, when the door opened, framing a man. He was pudgy, balding, wore a stand-up collar, sack suit and button shoes. There was a silly, smitten expression on his moon face, sideward turned as he said, "Good night, Miss Connell," and almost walked into 'Brasky.

Stepping aside, 'Brasky let him pass, frowning now, and at the head of the stairs he paused, casting a suspicious glance back at Pasco.

A woman moved into the doorway. Not young, not old, she was pleasingly mature. She was tall, with enough plumpness to give her height a well-rounded figure. It was drawn in at the waist, flowing out at the proper places. She wore no jewelry, and her dress was modest; the simplicity accented her feminine allure. At sight of 'Brasky, she glared.

He grinned. "Hi, Dimples. Long time no see. May I come in?"

She let him enter, closing the door after him, before she exploded. "Damn you, 'Brasky, lay off that Dimples stuff!" She stood with hands on hips, her dark eyes raking him. "You took your sweet time answering my call."

Nonchalantly he looked over the sumptuous office. "Reckon I'm still a clabber-brain, Dimples." He cringed. "I mean, Mona." Finally his gray eyes settled on her. "After all, your note was the first invite I got. The message your pardner, Salinas, gave me at noon—from you, he claimed—was to keep travelin'."

She cried, "I never...I sent word I wanted to see you!"

'Brasky didn't doubt her. He knew her well. She could lie, but this wasn't one. Bone's play wasn't hard to figure out. Afraid that Pasco might take over, he'd tried to rush Pasco along. Failing, he'd tried to eliminate him on the trail. Mona hadn't know about either.

Not that Mona couldn't be ruthless, unprincipled. He knew she could. He also knew more: she was hardest of metal, like him, 'Brasky. Still, when they came together there was too often a heat that made them malleable, fusible. That was their greatest danger.

She was saying, "That bandylegged so-and-so! He's not my partner. Only a hired gun—my range boss, so to speak. Just wait, I'll show him!" She tossed her head, her luxuriant auburn hair glinting with highlights. "And you let him scare you off. Why, 'Brasky?"

"Yeah? Why'd you wait for me at the hotel if you thought I'd left? I didn't know you were this fabulous Queen person, an' I had no particular reason to read brand on you. I'm only passin' through."

She had been hurrawing him, but now she flared in earnest. "Don't give me that! You've already visited the Barnes ranch. I suppose, since you've goggled that Pat snip, you're hell-bent to work on her outfit!"

"Got to admit it'd be nice work." Moving to a deep leather chair behind the walnut desk, he tested it, then sat down, stretching his long legs onto the desk top, spurs over its edge. Studying his boots, he said soberly, "No, Mona, you can skip that. I'm no cradle robber, an' she's not my kind of people."

He didn't look up as she came over, to stand beside him. The old feeling was seeping through him, like a slow poison, and he sensed the same thing with her. He fought it, for his memories and his backward thoughts could turn him savage and bitter, and the only prescription for it was action.

Her hand was on his shoulder her perfume in his nostrils. " 'Brasky, I haven't changed. I was your kind once. Why can't we—"

She broke off when someone knocked. 'Brasky heard her low sigh before she crossed the room and opened the door.

It was the straw-haired deputy sheriff.

HE STARTED to enter, saw Pasco and froze. Surprise, uncertainty and guilt showed on his face, and he mumbled something to Mona. Pasco caught the phrase: "...see you later."

'Brasky blew a smoke ring, remarking, "You get around, my friend."

"So do you," the deputy said, and was gone.

Closing the door, Mona stood with her back pressed against it, watching Pasco, aware that an elusive spell had been broken.

'Brasky said, "Like old times, Mona. Always were too many mules kickin' around your stall. But I give you credit for class. This joint is elegant enough for San Antonio or Denver. An' I remember your fancy place in the capital, last time I saw you, year-so ago."

She said, "I can remember beyond that."

He snapped, "Let's don't!" yet himself couldn't blank the images that flashed across his mental horizon. Sand hills and moonlight and this girl, who was too serious about romance. Whose love he couldn't return, because he loved someone else, someone he must try to forget! Between him and Mona then had been no deception. It couldn't be otherwise now....

The silence was long, unbearable; he lowered his feet to the floor.

Mona said, "Don't leave, 'Brasky. We'll keep it strictly business. And this is a no-limit game you'll go for."

Swinging her body with an animal grace he found hard to ignore, she came over. She took the cigar, which he hadn't realized was cold, from his mouth and put it in an ashtray. Half sitting on the desk edge, she continued: "It began last year, while I was in the capital. A fire, you recall, destroyed the statehouse. I had politician trade, and I keep my ears open. Among other things, all state land records were lost. Check?"

"Check. There've been dozens of squatter cases, plain steals, before the Land Board. A man must prove his titles. But why pick on Barnes? He has all his patents."

"Didn't you meet Barnes? Or perhaps his daughter blinded you first." She slid closer. "Darling, Barnes is easy game, a crackpot! All he thinks of is building a church, or a school—ideas like that. And his own fences falling down at home! His ranch originally took in the entire valley. Two-bit outfits have chiseled in on him, and he won't fight back. He's pious, peaceful, a cheek-turner. Live and let live—that sort of stuff!"

'Brasky nodded. "Yeah, an' when you throw a bunch of gun-skunks, like Bone's against him, seems to me you're hazin' a cripple."

She jerked erect. "Since when have you got religion?"

He hadn't; and he wanted to hear the rest. He had a few ideas of his own, not exactly split deals either. So he had to cover up his boner. At any rate, that was his self-explanation as he reached forward, seizing her hands, pulling her into his lap. Instantly she melted, her arms around him.

He said, "Unlock, Dimples. One thing at a time. How could I fit in? I'm not Bone. I don't take orders; I give 'em."

She snuggled against him. "We could agree on terms. I don't mind paying for value received. Bone's job was to bring in dummies, have them squat on choice sections of Barnes' range. We've got it laid out like a checkerboard now, and Barnes' riders have been scared off in droves, but Bone is letting his yahoos run wild. They're making trouble I don't want, for it might bring state agents down on me. You and your boys simply unload Bone and take over, and the deal goes on." She thumped his chest. "Only this: I want the land. You can have the spoils."

He thought, Maybe you have that range in your jug, but you haven't corked it up yet. Could be those papers in Miles' possession are the cork. I got to find that hombre!

She added, "You can even have that Pat doll, if you wish, though I'm sure she wouldn't be worth it—like this!"

She flung her mouth against his violently, tipping his head backward.

WHEN the door opened, admitting noises from the dance hall below, they abruptly shifted and stared. Bone Salinas stood there, a bit unsteady, a nasty smirk on his leather-dark face. He'd obviously imbibed some bottled nerve, and 'Brasky watched him intently, wondering how he'd track now. Drunk or sober, Bone was dangerously unpredictable. He might run, or gun.

Mona was on her feet. "Are you so ignorant, Salinas, you can't read the sign on that door?"

Bone said sarcastically, "Well, now, if I interrupted something, of course I'm sorry—"

Mona snapped him up. "I'll say you're sorry—the sorriest specimen I've run across lately!"

Bone's eyelids slanted until only pupil specks showed. He came several steps inside. "We better clear up a few points. What's going on?"

"Not what—who. And it's you. I'm paying you off, in full. Don't need your services any longer."

Bone's glance whipped to Pasco, who'd risen and was standing by the desk. 'Brasky felt the man's venomous anger, and in a way he could sympathize with Bone. He himself didn't like this caper of Mona's.

Without looking at her, Bone said, "Maybe I don't cotton to the idea. Maybe me and my outfit don't need you."

Mona said flatly, "Be smart! You're losing nothing."

'Brasky knew better. If Bone was replaced here by Pasco, he'd lose gun prestige, and his rep would suffer. Those things were important in the trigger trade. Bone's pride was his most vulnerable spot, and having pricked it once today, Pasco waited expectantly to see what turn his temper would take.

Even so, he was caught short by the nature of Bone's explosion. Bone made no play toward his pearl-butted Colts. Instead he launched himself headlong at 'Brasky, who swerved yet couldn't prevent their collision. He was dragged to his knees by Bone.

Salinas had the weight edge, using it to advantage as he ripped vicious blows into Pasco's face. Finally Pasco came up, clinching, driving a knee into Bone's belly. Bone was drawn over when they broke, and 'Brasky chopped the side of his head, once, twice, again. Bone went down.

That punishment would have done in an

ordinary man, but Bone rolled and bounced back, shaking hair out of his eyes. When Pasco charged imprudently, he sidestepped, and Pasco was wide open in a quick twist. Bone gave him a barrage of punches that hurled him against the wall with an impact that jarred it. He followed up with rights and lefts that rocked Pasco back and forth.

Weak-legged, the wall helping him to remain on his feet, Pasco saw Mona flash in. She had a paper weight, began flailing Salinas with it. Her attack, with Bone cringing under it, gave 'Brasky a much-needed breather. But it roweled his masculine vanity, and he cried, "Mona, no!"

She disregarded him, and when Bone stumbled from a grazing blow, she jumped in with a better aim. 'Brasky grabbed her, tried to shunt her aside; failing, he exasperately flung her into a corner—and ducked as Bone charged him.

Now it was bar-nothing, back-alley knockdown with them. 'Brasky knew all the dirty tricks, yet he was a gunfighter, scornful of fists. He was slow getting organized. When he did, he drove Salinas through the doorway onto the balcony, where they slugged away. Below them, the saloon crowd watched in an awed silence. They gasped once in suspense while Bone hung over a railing.

Bone went down—three times—and each time that he staggered up, on hands and knees, 'Brasky was above him, lashing out with a boot, kicking him in the face, the meaty sound of contact magnified by the stillness. The final time Bone went over backward, his limp body poised on the top edge of the stairway. Panting, Pasco shoved it with a toe, and it went thumping down the steps.

Battered, disgusted, the blue vein in the middle of his forehead pulsing against taut skin, 'Brasky shuttled his stare over the barroom, alert for Salinas henchmen. They were there, he knew, but the threats that surprised and immobilized him came from Blue Moon housemen. Three sawed-off riot guns were trained on him—by a lookout from his high chair, a bartender over his rosewood counter, and a roving bouncer....

CHAPTER FOUR

Partners

MONA came to the rail, calling down, "Nate—Ash—Dutch! It's okay. We just stripped the deck for a new deal. Have Utah Grimes and his friends escort Mr. Salinas elsewhere. Everybody else, bottoms up! It's on me, toasting a new partnership."

Back in the office, while she swabbed his swollen features and iodined his split cheek, 'Brasky sat dejectedly flexing fingers. The knuckles skinned, the joints stiff, he muttered, "Dogfightin' like a fool!"

She pressed court plaster in place, then hugged him not too gently, even though he winced. "I knew you wouldn't let me down, darling."

He thought, You didn't give me a chance to.

Mona was nervous, restless. She got a cigarette from a desk drawer, lit it. "You reckon Bone'll make trouble?" 'Brasky shrugged; she frowned. "But what could he do? If his dummies stick and prove up, I've already got their quit-claims! No, he'll pull stakes." Despite her self-assurance, her worried manner persisted. Going to a corner cabinet, she produced a bottle, decanter and glasses, asking over her shoulder, "Want a drink?"

Normally a non-drinker, Pasco needed a bracer. "A double slug."

She brought it over, perched on the desk, and said, "To us." 'Brasky tossed his off, grimacing at its bite, then watched her drink smoothly. Before she finished, he reached out, took the glass from her. There was a hardness in his glance as he smelled it, tasted it. And he said, "Damn it, Dimples, you can't even play it straight when you drink with a man, can you?"

"I... What do you mean?"

"That colored water!"

"I can't take liquor, 'Brasky. I always drink blue moons." When he came to his feet, she did likewise. He crashed the glass on the floor, turned, and she cried, "'Brasky! Where are you going?"

Halfway across the room, bending for his crumpled hat, 'Brasky let his anger die. After all, he knew her, what to expect from her. People very seldom changed. He said lamely, "Don't allow I can throw an' tie Bone's bunch by myself, do you? I'm goin' to send a wire to my boys."

He went out. Descending the stairs, he was conscious of sore muscles. Vigilant as ever, he skirted the crowd, now in high revelry. As he reached the swing doors, Dave Tatum entered. The youngster paused, facing him, and his harassed look became tinged with uncertainty, as it had once before.

Dave asked, "What happened here, Pasco?"

Wondering what Pat Barnes saw in this scrub-faced kid, 'Brasky said, "Nothin' to interest you, buster, unless you got a warrant for disturbin' the peace, or assault, or the likes."

The saloon was quieting as attention focused on the pair. Dave's unease increased. "Where's Mo—the Queen?"

'Brasky eyed him sharply, thinking, I figgered she had you wrapped around her finger, too! "She's where you usually find her."

He moved quickly through the batwings, fading sidewise into deep shadows along the wall. For several minutes he remained there, studying the deserted, mottled street before going up the boardwalk toward the courthouse, now dark.

The telegraph office was in the stage terminal, Pintados being a hub for three lines. A night man, doubling in brass, told Pasco his message would go out soon as he finished with a company wire. Pasco wrote it, paid off and asked in passing, "You by chance know where I might find this Agent Miles?"

"Keith Miles? Valley Hotel, I suppose. He rooms there."

'Brasky felt stupid. Miles under his nose all this time! Going back toward the hotel, he also felt an odd lack of enthusiasm for this ripe setup. Teaming with Mona again, of his own accord or not, smacked of old times; and he had no qualms about double-dealing her if the percentages favored it. As for Bone and his hardcases, they were what kept him from stagnation.

Maybe he'd feel better when his boys arrived. He knew they'd saddle and ride the moment they got his word; that would throw them in here some time late tomorrow.

He abruptly edged into heavier gloom, sensing the movement behind him. Swiveling, he watched Sheriff Tatum cross the street. Obviously Dave had been waiting on the opposite side until he passed. Tatum hesitated briefly before the telegraph office, glancing in Pasco's direction, then entered. . . .

THE pudgy, moon-faced man who'd been in Mona's office earlier was standing outside the hotel when 'Brasky came up. He gave 'Brasky a scowl, and 'Brasky scowled back, although really amused. Mona always affected men thus, making them jealous tomcats. She was fire and ice—and 'Brasky didn't prefer his women so complex.

As he turned into the lobby, he caught a soft scuffing of hoofs, above the background of saloon noises. He pivoted, staring upstreet again, and noted that the pudgy man was looking that way also, with an alerted interest.

There were horses banked before the courthouse, horses that hadn't been there several minutes ago. Because of the distance and spotty moonlight, Pasco couldn't determine how many, but three-four riders

(Continued on page 100)

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(Continued from page 98)

made solid shapes in saddles. A light appeared in the building—from an office, not the corridor.

The pudgy man suddenly began walking toward it, going faster with each step until he was in a waddling run. 'Brasky frowned in puzzlement, held back; then on impulse followed, keeping to the shadowy cover of walls, his progress cautious. When the man reached the group of horsemen, Pasco heard the voices raised, saw the bobbing blur of movements.

A lone shot rang out, picking up echoes along the street. Jerking his right-hand .44, 'Brasky broke into a run. The horses were milling, and blacker shopes were streaking from the courthouse's double doors.

Some seventy yards away, Pasco ducked behind the outset of a store front, not so foolish or reckless that he'd barge in without knowing the score. At the slap of boots behind him, he whirled and saw Dave Tatum running up from the telegraph office. As the horses began to plunge and take off down a side street, Tatum was firing. The riders returned his fire, their guns winking in the night as they passed from view. All but the last rider. 'Brasky had lined down on him, plucking him from leather, as if by an invisible lasso.

After that blasting interval, the silence seemed unreal. Dave stared at Pasco, surprised by his presence, in fact more perturbed than he'd been during the shooting. 'Brasky studied him, mentally admitting that he'd stood and traded lead like his dad, old Tom.

Dave said awkwardly, "Thanks. They sure skunked me."

"When slugs whistle close enough to pick off your hat, Dave, it's no disgrace to miss. Well—grab your John B. an' c'mon. Let's see what we got."

Pintados, clamped in its shell by the fireworks, now came out to investigate. 'Brasky shooed people away as he and Dave bent over the sprawled figure of the dead rider. Dave identified him. "He's one of the Salinas imports. I think I recognized Utah Grimes' piebald mare, too."

On the steps of the courthouse they found the second body, that of a man who, even in death, looked uncomfortable in his stand-up collar. Dave pondered, said, "I savvy it! It was Salinas!" and went darting into the building.

'Brasky stayed outside, unaccountably depressed by the pudgy man's finish. Sometimes he could feel that final bullet tearing into his own body, putting out the light of life. Without turning, he knew when Mona came up beside him. He heard her tight breath, but there was nothing disturbed in her manner as she said, "So they killed Miles. If only they could've known, 'Brasky! It wasn't necessary."

Her meaning eluded him, yet his shock was genuine. His luck was certainly sour. "Is this Keith Miles, the land agent?"

She nodded as Dave emerged excitedly, joining them. "They cleaned out his office, Mona. Cabinet and desk. Not a paper left!"

She asked, "Salinas?"

Pasco answered irritably. "Of course. You didn't believe he'd toss in his cards, now, did you, Dimples? He's an old player at pistol poker. Done called your hand and raked in the first pot."

Mona's laugh was harsh. "Not quite. If Bone was after particular papers—patents and deeds, for instance—he got fooled. I have them. Poor Miles gave them to me this afternoon."

'BRASKY thought, I should know that when you put fingers in a pie, you ram in your arm, up to the elbow!

Instead of relief, something strained was in Tatum's voice. "You mean Bible Barnes' land titles? Miles was taking them to the capital tomorrow."

Mona's features were vague in the dark,

(Continued on page 102)

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(Continued from page 100)

but 'Brasky sensed her probing regard on Dave. "I hardly think Miles can make it."

Now his laugh was harsh. "Hardly! Well, you copped your bet, Mona, and that's what counts." For some reason the kid seemed shaky in mind, trying to orient himself. "Where could that deputy be? You better get off the street, Mona. I'll see you in the Blue Moon after a while."

She hooked onto 'Brasky's arm, and they walked away, two tall figures moving with smooth, easy grace. Pasco had meant to stay with Dave, whose brand still puzzled him, but Mona had a practiced way of imposing her will on others. She asked, "You think Bone will try again?"

"He didn't get the papers, did he?"

Before they reached the hotel, several small saloons had doused lights, closed up. People were thinning out on the street. Pintados smelled the trouble in the air. As Pasco got his carbine from the desk, Mona stood inside the lobby entrance, watching the street go dark, except for the Blue Moon's beckoning flambeaux. When they went out into the night, she pressed so close against him he could feel the shiver in her body—yet he wouldn't have sworn it was fear. Not in this soft-eyed lynx!

The Blue Moon was deserted, save for house personnel who crowded around them. Pasco ordered the inside lights dimmed, the outside flares left alone, a measure against surprise attack. "Anywhere in town you can go, Mona?"

"My living quarters are upstairs. I'm staying here. Besides, I'll bet you're wrong. Bone won't push his luck by tilting against this windmill."

'Brasky shrugged, glancing at a clock above the bar. "Name your bet. It'll take him perhaps fifteen minutes to discover those papers aren't in his haul. Even a dumb cluck like him can guess who's got 'em."

Dave Tatum entered then. As he joined them, he noted the disposition 'Brasky had made of the housemen, at front and back, at the painted windows. "Mighty quiet out there. Why don't you lock up? This night's killed."

"Got a bet on," Mona said. "Get yourself a drink, Davey."

He shook his head, pulled out a chair and sat down. He rolled a cigarette, tried to slouch, yet was glaringly uncomfortable; and when he sought to back up on the subject, he was transparent. "I—uh—reckon you want me to go along tomorrow, when you take those certificates—"

Mona leaned close, laughing lightly. "Tomorrow's another day, Davey. I'm like a goose; wake up in a new world each morning." She removed his hat, began rumpling his sandy hair. "Relax, Davey. Don't be so serious." Pasco watched with bland amusement, knowing how she could give the works. Older men than Dave had succumbed. Dave squirmed. "Enjoy life while you're young. Or you might turn out like 'Brasky, aged and bitter."

'Brasky said, "It's not the years; it's the mileage I've had." He thought, At least you haven't got him completely wound up yet.

They tensed when a disturbance sounded at the rear door. Nate, the shotgun lookout, was talking through the panel before he admitted the lank depuy. Dave appeared glad of the distraction. When the deputy came shuffling up, Dave said, "Never on hand when I need you, Slim. Where you been?"

Slim's yellow eyes rummaged the place. "Sashayin' around, boss."

'Brasky said, "I had a dog that sashayed once. Ended up bitin' his own tail off. Now maybe you got a different twist, such as playin' both ends against the middle. Then if Dave here don't cast a big enough shadow, you might become sheriff. Or if—"

Slim showed dingy teeth in a sneer. "If you'll let up on my pedigree, smart guy, I'll tell you somethin'. This place is surrounded. Utah Grimes has a dozen gun-

slicks staked out there in the dark, waitin' to cut loose!"

Dave jerked erect. Mona sat up straight. And 'Brasky looked at the bar clock. He said, "Eleven minutes, Dimples. Damn it —what'd we bet?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Siege

HIS Winchester carbine lay on the table. Reaching for it, 'Brasky grinned at Mona and Dave. "Take it easy. Be a nice workout for us. We got near a dozen men ourselves, an' not amateurs." He frowned, flicking a narrow gaze to the deputy. "You said Utah Grimes. Where's Salinas?"

Slim said insolently, "How should I know?"

The carbine jumped into 'Brasky's fingers; the click of its levered action was a deadly sound in the silence. *"Where's Salinas?"*

Slim flinched. "He—he's split forces. Utah's to pin you down, an' get them papers, if possible. Salinas is movin' in on the Barnes ranch."

"Hell's bells! How many men has Bone got? An army?"

"Almost. He's brought in the Devil's Dozen gang from Big Sandy. Been hidin' them out until he was ready to hit Barnes' herds in one swoop. Changed his plans tonight; decided to take over the ranch instead."

"Drop your shell-belt an' sashay into a corner." He waited until Slim complied, then returned his attention to Mona and Dave. "Reckon Bone's an old hand now, Mona? If you establish the Barnes titles, you're out in the cold. If you don't, Bone will have possession of the outfit. He'll run in new dummies to file, an' you're still out in the cold."

Mona sat perfectly quiet in body and features, only her eyes alive in a face that

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was alabaster-white. At last she asked, "When are your boys due?

"Tomorrow, likely."

Dave aimed a passing glance at 'Brasky. He was taut, worried; kept running his tongue over his lips.

Mona said, "Let Bone do that dirty work. Ousting the Barneses would be our most ticklish part, the only part that might backfire. So let Bone do it—then you plow Bone under."

It was logic, but 'Brasky withheld comment. His thoughts were trapped in the deep layers of his mind, and try as he might, he couldn't force them to the surface. Silence built up around the three.

Dave asked abruptly, "How far do you think Bone'll go, Pasco?"

"How rough, you mean? No rougher'n he was with Keith Miles, another unarmed man." He rose to his feet, the carbine tucked under his arm. He watched Mona as he spoke to Dave. "What say, Dave, we give Bible a hand,"

Mona leaped up angrily. "Whose side you on, 'Brasky,"

'Brasky was slowly revolving, the tipped-up .44-40 covering all points of the barroom, his eyes silver-bright. "I don't know, Mona. Right now, let's put it this way: a dog out there wagged its tail at me—a friendly dog I don't want kicked around tonight."

"A dog, I bet!" She laughed shrilly. "Go ahead, clabber-brain. You don't cross me up. Try to leave here!"

It was combustible, this moment, and Pasco realized it. The Blue Moon floor crew was the best money could buy. They were ready, a pack awaiting release by Mona. Pasco had a brief flash of wonder as to why he was bucking this layout. It was just something deeper than impulse, something he didn't try to analyze, because he knew he couldn't. He shrugged, said, "C'mon, Dave."

A mule kick couldn't have jarred him

more than Dave's reply: "I—I'm staying here. The Queen's in a pinch, too."

'Brasky thought, You filthy stinker! He said, "Not half the pinch she'll be in, if she sic's anyone on me. She won't have enough men left to hold the front door against Utah's yahoos. . . . I'll remember you to the Barnes folks, buster."

He began moving toward the rear door; and suddenly Mona broke. Ignoring the carbine, flashing past it, she came up against him, her hands outspread on his chest. "'Brasky! I need you. You can't leave me!" Their eyes clashed, and she knew he could. Infuriated, she raked his taped cheek with her nails, drawing blood. "Damn you, you always had too much principle!"

"Is that right, Dimples? I've often wondered if I had too much, but you're the first to complain." She'd made a mistake, coming this close, for his free arm encircled her slim waist, vising her up against him. "Come along to the rear door, *bonita.* I want to whisper in your ear."

Nate, on guard there, obeyed the gesture of the Winchester and moved away. 'Brasky cracked the door, peered out. Then he kissed Mona, who tried to avert her face, only to change her mind and yield him moist, curved lips. He whispered, "You Jezebel, you!" and plunged into darkness. . . .

THREE shots tore ragged holes in the night's blanket of silence, the lead questing about 'Brasky's vicinity. Running low and bent over, he wasted none in return. From the street somebody yelled, somebody fired—and it was a fuse setting off the powder keg.

The night light was out in the stable when he reached it, an eternity later, and he thought it empty. He'd seen a figure leave, pried loose by the hubbub; the figure had pelted past him within an arm's length. He therefore was shocked when he ran

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full tilt into another form in the runway. In the blind collision, a shifting of darker shadows in the gloom, he triggered the carbine in reflex. Its muzzle blast swept the man aside.

Seconds later, His Smoky horse saddled and snorting, 'Brasky Pasco cannoned into the street. As he left town and hit the open mesquite, the din of the Blue Moon battle faded in his ears.

* * *

The rattle of gunfire became thunder on the midnight air as he rode up the *canada* toward the Barnes ranch. There was caution in him, and a disquiet. He was jumping from the frying pan into the fire; a "gun-bum" thrusting his unwanted help upon those snooty, pious—suckers! Hell, the world was full of them. They were meant to be preyed upon, and he'd done his share.

He reined up, half swinging Smoky around. He belonged back with Mona's crowd, this setup was made to order for his talents. He could . . . However, he went forward again. To see, he told himself, how Bone played this hand.

He came up behind the five horsemen in a clump of piñons. Two of them he recognized: the shoestring cowmen, Mark and Jed. All watched the scene on the flat before them.

The ranch house stood out in isolation like a sore thumb, inviting a four-sided attack, which Bone's gang was giving it now. Shadows, mounted and afoot, scuttled about, tightening that ring; their gun flashes made crazy patterns in the moonlight. And the response from the house was a random fire, woefully weak.

Pasco was close enough to hear Mark say, "We can't do any good from out here. They'd swarm over us like bees. If only we could get inside, we might make a difference."

Another said, "Whether we make it or not, it's suicide. Still I'll bust a gut tryin'. They've ruined me, but mebbe I can repay ol' Bible for the favors he's shown me. Thing is, how'll we go about it?"

The man's dauntless courage reached out and smote Pasco. And it suddenly

From his leather-lined lungs rose a full-throated cry—the hai-yaiiah Ogallala yell.

came to him that life in general—and his in particular—was a tawny desert. Occasionally there was an oasis, a green vista or a pool of water or a steadfast faith, where a man might rest and absorb strength for the barren journey ahead. Some towns were like an oasis, and some men. Bible Barnes was one. 'Brasky could never despoil or waste such a spot—and he wouldn't let Bone Salinas do it either!

That was what he had in common with these five little creatures. That was why he was here!

He said, watching their faces jerk toward him, "I think we could churn 'em up if we'd spread out fanwise, make a run when I signal, an' point in on the front door there. Game to try it?"

Their nods were slow but emphatic.

He sat the big buckskin while they

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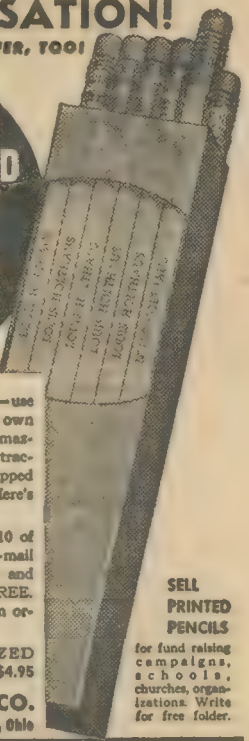

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moved out, forming a skirmish front. Then from his leather-lined lungs rose a full-throated cry—the *hai-yaiiiah* Ogallala yell of his that had throbbed over much of the West. It sounded off the suicide charge; it paced and maintained that charge; and it threw Bone's attackers into momentary panic.

Bone was not the only one who'd heard that yell before.

'Brasky rode by knee pressure, both hands working the Winchester, gushing lead right and left. He'd covered half the three hundred yards before the rattled forces snapped out of their shock, firing back.

It was timing out remarkably well, surprising Pasco. The other five, converging upon the ranch yard, were right on his heels. Whipping right leg over pommel, 'Brasky left the saddle while Smoky was still going. Running forward with the horse, its split rein in his hand, he headed for the doorway, now flung wide by someone inside. He intended taking Smoky in with him, for specific reasons, but in the fast jam another bronc smacked into the gelding, and Smoky broke, wheeling away.

Tumbling into the parlor, the others trailing, Pasco faced Pat Barnes. She was powderstained, held a rifle. Her eyes flicked from one man to another—expecting Dave, Pasco knew—and some of her disappointment showed.

She said, "I'm so glad you've come—all of you—Mr. Pasco!"

FOR three hours they held the Salinas warriors at bay. At first there were three Barnes punchers, Pat and the five valley ranchers, all fighting under Pasco's direction. Now there were only six, 'Brasky included, on the firing line, and they wouldn't be there much longer. Their cartridges were about gone. Barnes didn't furnish shells for his boys, and Smoky, somewhere in the blue-black gloom, car-

ried Pasco's spare supply in a saddlebag.

Once, earlier, Pat had come and hunkered by 'Brasky, asking, "Is there any way we can get word to Dave? He'd rush help." Reluctant to hurt her, 'Brasky shook his head and shifted to a new danger spot. Now, between treatment of the wounded, she was beside him again. "It's hopeless, isn't it, Mr. Pasco? Oh, if only Dave knew!"

'Brasky snarled, "Your Romeo's tied up in town. Forget him!" Punching the last bullets from his belt-loops, he loaded one Cavalry Colt. "Those yahooes are makin' ready for another try, an' this time, or next time, they'll break in. You better think of your father an' help me handle him."

In her silence, they both had identical thoughts about Bible Barnes, who sat in his bedroom down the hall. Aloof and remote from this turmoil, he was reading his family Testament. 'Brasky had sought to reason with him several hours ago.

Bible had said, "I am touched by the concern which you and my other friends manifest for me, but I deplore the situation. This is my home; I will not flee it. Why should I? I pray, 'Thy will be done,' and I do not question, or fear, that will."

Pat said wearily, "It's no use. Father won't budge."

'Brasky thought, then they'll get to him over my dead body. He almost voiced it, as he rose, but didn't, because he felt like laughing at such unexpected heroics. By turning sentimental, he was getting himself killed!

He went to the room and stood in its soft lamplight, though against a far wall, for Barnes had his window up, no shades drawn. He sat in a rawhide chair beside his iron-wrought bedstead, reading. To him, that gun-shattered world outside didn't exist. When he raised his glance and laid it on Pasco, the latter fidgeted under its compassionate intensity.

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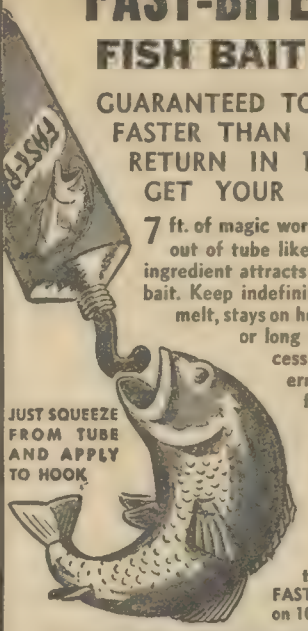

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"Barnes, you better be sensible. We got one fightin' chance left—"

"Have you no faith whatever, Pasco?"

"Damn little when my hogleg's runni' dry. I like to live!"

Barnes closed the calf-bound Bible. He said, "My friend, if I can live by this Book"—he held it up—"I can die by it."

It was peculiar, the distant impressions that Pasco registered. He heard the drone of the slug, saw the monkscloth drape billow inward, heard the smashing detonation of the Colt in the yard, saw Barnes go over backward in his chair, under the leaden impact. And emotion never had burned so hotly within him. It was a branding iron searing his soul.

He whirled into that window, half-sprawling his long frame in its deep recess. He saw a wheeling horseman, full in the oblong of light cast from the room. Fast as he could tilt and rock the feather's touch hammer, he emptied the Colt. And Bone Salinas came out of leather, his lifeless body bouncing when it struck the ground.

'Brasky pouched his gun, slowly turned and stared—at Bible Barnes awkwardly pulling himself up from the floor. Bible still clutched his Testament, and when he raised it for his own inspection, Pasco could see the ruffled tear of pages, the dullish missile imbedded in their thick folds.

Bible looked from it to 'Brasky, and their silence was eloquent.

'Brasky said presently, "I've never doubted but what that Book could save lives in more ways than one. . . ."

IN THE respite that followed Bone's death, while his outfit was leaderless, the others arrived. Dave Tatum, Mona, her housemen. They were in fine fettle, keyed right for the fight. They'd licked the Grimes bunch, and now for an interval the night trembled from their hoofs and gunfire, as they fan another roundup tally. Then quiet prevailed.

In the Barnes living room, filled to overflowing, 'Brasky stood by and watched Dave return land titles to Bible Barnes, who then re-entrusted them to Dave. The kid sheriff, 'Brasky conceded, had been smarter than he allowed. While he, Pasco, took over here at the ranch, Dave had stuck close to those papers—and got them. Ol' Tom's boots might fit Dave yet.

When he saw her edging toward him, he went weaving from the room. She trapped him in the doorway, and there was blood in her eyes. He tried to push past. "Gotta hunt my Smoky horse, Mona."

She latched onto him, walked him into the moonlight. When she checked up, she faced him with wordless menace.

He tried to bluff her. "So he froze you out at your own game. Must be pretty good. Got the deeds an' made you ride with him, too. Why, Mona?"

"He didn't! I just . . . 'Brasky, I ought to claw your eyes out! My place is a shambles, and you ruined a perfect setup!"

'Brasky grinned. "You phony! You're like them blue moons you an' your gals guzzle. When the chips are down, you can't take it."

She lashed at him with both hands. He grabbed them, held them briefly before placing them on his shoulders. She said, "I should've known it would happen. You always made me groggy, willing to string along." She swayed a bit closer. "What now, 'Brasky?"

"Rest up today, ride out tomorrow. Dave told me he canceled that wire I sent my boys. They'll be waitin' for me."

She bristled. "They'll be . . . How about me? Just one day?" Then she sighed. "You always get your way, you damned lovable devil. Well, what am I going to do?"

"What a foolish question, Dimples. Did your mom raise any idiots? You're ridin' with me!"

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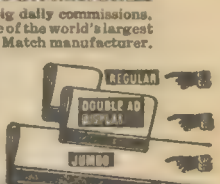

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(Continued from page 14)

over, pronto. Open up!" It was Pecos yelling.

"Come an' get him, Pecos!" he called. The answer to that was a fusillade of lead through the windows. Piggin'-String flung himself flat on the floor, shoved the wounded kid under the bunk and worked his old Colt from the chinks in logs. The light of battle shone in his eyes; new life seemed to surge through him as he jammed more shells into the gun and Injuned around to the other side to fight off a fresh attack.

His jaw clamped together. He had something to live for, to fight for now! Sobbing, cursing, he thumbed the hammer until his thumb was raw and bleeding. A slug took him in the shoulder, but he grinned and snapped a shot at a dark figure snaking through the grass.

A heavy load of gunfire came from the rear, and then, in a momentary lull, he painfully dragged through the door with his living burden.

How the two of them got out of that, he never knew. He heard the crackle of fire on a go-devil, flames leaping high, strike the tinder-dry side of the shack. Bullets sought him out, shredded his ragged coat. And then peace shrouded the Valley. . . .

Up in Northern Wyoming, two states away, drifting cowboys tell of a lean, gaunt man and a younger man who have as neat a cattle spread as you'd care to see. A peaceful, slow-spoken sort of hombre is the older man, with a slouch to his left shoulder and a fondness for playing the banjo of an evening.

And back in the Grindstone, on a certain night of each year, a night which has significance to the few old-timers left there, they say that strange sounds, like the tinkle of a banjo, fill the little clump of scrub willows, where rest two sunken, unmarked graves. . . .

(Continued from page 85)

himself from the madness that had been visited upon him. He was shaking like a man with the ague. The fire had gone from his eyes; his face was gray, care-lined. Soul-sick, he went back to his own small dwelling.

Until late that afternoon he locked himself in his own room. More than ever before, he thought, he had proved himself a failure. There was but one thing to do, since he was not worthy to be a man of the cloth—retire from the ministry, leave the country. And suddenly, he looked out the window and stiffened, the blood pounding in his ears at what he saw.

A strange procession was making its way up the bald little hill toward his house. In the van was Dutch Frank, and following him were the denizens of Hell's Half Mile—gamblers, bar-flies, girls from the honky-tonks. Frank had his sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm.

White-faced, Reverend Carter slipped out of his house. Here was Dutch Frank, ready to enjoy his revenge!

Well, he was ready. . . .

Frank himself clumped onto the steps and to the door, as Carter groped his way to it.

Dutch Frank's eyes were swollen and his nose puffed. He grinned.

"Parson, I reckon we misjudged you. You handed out some purty strong medicine this mornin' after I started you off. If you can preach as well as you can scrap, we'd sure like to hear it. Guess there's room fer us both here—an' mebbe we each needed a bit of reformin'. You know how we are—we like our religion an' our liquor with a good dose of hell-fire, so if you'll come over to church an' say a few words, I'll see that these jaspers is dehorned proper. Will you do it?"

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Hooded Raincoat $3.99. Special Purchase. Extra long, full length slipover Fisherman's Rain Coat with Parka hood. Extends way below knees. Tough Vinylite Plastic. Not illus. Olive drab. State size. Only **$3.99.**

"MASTEREEL" AND GLASS SPINNING ROD

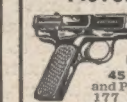
$40.25 Value! Both For **$26.95**

Save $13.30 on this outfit! "Supreme Quality" Famous **Airex Bache Brown** "Mastereel" (Reel alone is $23.75). Spinning Reel, plus the Horrocks-Ibbotson $16.50 Value, 5¾ ft., 2-piece SOLID GLASS SPINNING ROD. **This Rod and Reel will handle lures from 1/6 oz. to ¾ oz. weight perfectly! Both for only....$26.95** (Add $4.95 for an excellent assortment of spinning lures in a plastic box, plus an extra spool for the Mastereel, plus 100 yds. Nylon Spinning Line.)

SMITH & WESSON

KLEIN'S selection of new **SMITH & WESSON** Revolvers including S&W K22, K38 in Combat Masterpiece 4" or 6" Target Models @ **$71.50** each; 38/44 — 6½" Outdoorsman" @ **$84.75**; 357 Magnum @ **$110.00**; 32 Hand Ejector @ **$58.00**; 38 Terrier @ **$58.00**; 32 or 38 Regulation Police @ **$58.00**; 38 Military and Police @ **$62.00** (state barrel length wanted).

MARKSMAN AIR PISTOL $5.95



Looks and Feels like **NEW MODEL U. S. ARMY 45 Auto.** Accurate and Powerful. Shoots 177 caliber pellets, darts, and BB's. Generous supply included. **Specially Priced..... $5.95**

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Brand New! For the shooter who must have the best! 10 shot 22 Long Rifle. 4¾" barrel, 8¾" overall, blued. Weight 36 oz. Perfect balance, amazingly accurate. **STANDARD RUGER, BLUED..... $37.50**

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BROWNING 25 AUTO

$24.95

Sale! Tiny pocket 25 Automatic Pistol —only **$24.95.** Famous Belgian Browning Pre-War Pistol — guaranteed in good shooting condition. Only 4½" long. Blued.

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New! For any handgun. Hand carved saddle leather. Describe gun exactly. **$5.95.**

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KLEIN'S Selection of NEW Colt Guns include: Colt 38, 9 mm Luger or 45 Automatic, regular or light weight @ **$65.00**; Colt Conversion Unit @ **$40.00**; Colt 22 Automatics: Challenger @ **$52.50**; Woodsman Target @ **$70.00**; Woodsman Match Target @ **$85.00**; Official Police 38 Special @ **$65.00**; Detective Special 32 or 38 @ **$65.00**; 22 or 38 Officer's Model Target "Special" @ **$75.00.**

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$22.45

Brand New! Made by famous Iver Johnson, 8 shot, 22 short, Long or Long Rifle caliber cartridges, 6" barrel, blued, walnut grips. Amazing Value, only **$22.45.**

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Brand New! Breakopen, 22 caliber, 8 shot, Target Model, 6" barrel. Only **$37.75.**

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Brand New! Best selling CO_2 (Carbon Dioxide Gas) Pistol, 22 caliber, powered by cheap CO_2 Cylinder obtainable everywhere. Complete with a good big supply of extra CO_2 cylinders and 22 caliber lead pellets. Write for FREE Schimel literature. **Postpaid, $20.00 complete**

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$27.00 GEP ROD AND SOUTH BEND REEL

Both For **$17.95**

The "GEP" $16 Value Model 380 PISTOL GRIP Actionized Solid Glass Fiber Casting Rod. 4 STAINLESS STEEL GUIDES, selected cork patented "Gep" **pistol grip,** 5, 5½ or 6 ft. lengths, medium or light action (state choice). Plus the **South Bend** sturdy, lightweight, aluminum PERFECTORENO level wind and anti-backlash reel. Anodized, rich maroon aluminum—weighs only 6 oz. Phosphor bronze bearings and bushings. Has famous Perfectoreno spool control mechanism, capacity 100 yds. 18 lb. line (New 1950 disc. model #760—$11.00 value). **Both Rod and Reel, only..... $17.95**

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Here's a rod and reel bargain you can't beat! The South Bend $10.00 Model 400 Level wind and anti-backlash Reel (1950 disc. model). PLUS the 1951 model H.I. "Admiral" solid glass fiber 3½, 4, 4½, 5, or 5½ ft. Casting Rod.

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SCOOP! $39.95 BERNARDELLI..... $29.95

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Given! Extra clip, cleaning rod and oiler with every gun.

Brand new! Six shot. Blued finish. **Double safety.** Vest pocket size, 4⅛" long overall, height 2½", 2" barrel, weight 9 oz. **Made in Italy** by the famous **Bernardelli** Arms Company. **Parts available.** Diamond checkered bakelite grips. Simple button release permits easy removal of firing pin assembly. This powerful little **Bernardelli** meets the demand for a 25 caliber (6.35mm) Auto Pistol of slight weight and very small size, yet durable, practical, easy and efficient in operation. Shoots six shots as fast as you can pull the trigger. Complete with **extra clip,** cleaning rod, oiler and certificate of **Official Italian Government** proof test. The Bernardelli sells everywhere for $39.95 and more! Leave it to **Klein's** to bring it to you for only..... **$29.95**

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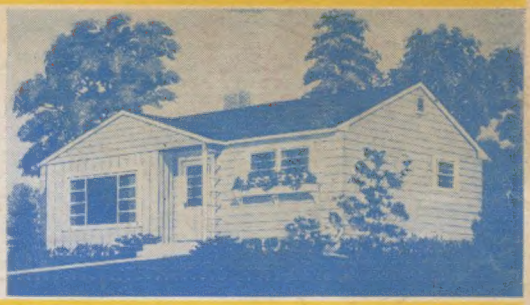

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